

## **Ark Volume 03**

### **Act 1 : The Silver Arrow**

About 100 people were gathered on the wide balcony of the Magic Tower's top floor. They were players who passed the level 60 restriction screening of the Magic Institute.

As expected of a next generation game, New World offered countless variables within the system. To put it simply, the level of freedom was high. Of course, since there were countless variables in raising a character, simply hunting wasn't everything. That said, the unchanging basic formula, which applied to all games, also applied to New World.

It was 'time spent equals level'. If your level is higher than others, then it means you spent more time than others!

New World had been out for a little over four months. Moreover, it was three to four times harder to level up in new World compared to other games. This meant the players would have raised their levels to 180-240 in four months in a different game. 100 such extraordinary high-leveled players had gathered in Giran alone. This was the result wrought by New World's strong addictive nature, which exceeded all imagination.

Of course, everyone had their own know-how. It was the reason why they were overflowing with confidence despite receiving a quest where they didn't know what kind of enemies would appear.

However, Ark wasn't at all interested in their confidence. He was just drooling over their equipment.

'This is no joke, just where did they get such items?'

Ark thought he was pretty lucky with items in his own way. But after looking at the gathered users' equipment, his confidence vanished.

'That one's definitely at least a Rare item.'

A brightly shining, horned viking helmet, gloves studded with sharp blades from the back of the hand to the elbow, shoes made of bones as red as dripping blood, a two-handed sword with a saw-like blade; they were all unusual pieces of equipment.

In addition, although there were 100 users gathered, he didn't see any pieces of the same equipment. It felt like he'd come to an exhibition of high-class items.

He was gulping down his drool. 'If you converted all the items into money, just how much would it be?

Ark's keen eye was further honed at the blind auction. After making calculations on the spot, each person was wearing equipment worth around 400-500 gold.

'With 100 users, that's at least 40,000 Gold. 400 million when converted into Won (~\$400,000)! An unreal estimate.

Ark was just a commoner who sighed when the monthly utility bills came. Though they said the value of money wasn't the same as it used to be because of the soaring prices, for a commoner, hearing the word "million" was still enough to make them cry out. "Millions" in gold were swimming before his eyes.

*[T/N: The author includes a pun here, where the Korean word for million, pronounced "ugk," is like a sound of surprise, like "ah!"]*

News he'd seen recently came to mind— the auction site specializing in New World items had already hit 10 billion won in market size. At the time, he just thought, "whatever." It was unimaginable anyways. But now, it didn't feel like someone else's matter.

'Ack, if all those people were monsters...'

"Please lend me your attention for a moment." Just then, the Magic Institute NPC appeared at the top floor after finishing the screening process. "New information has just come in. The Magic Institute isn't the only one who thinks this is a bad situation. A renowned Merchant guild located in the Commerce District south of Giran, 'Midus', has sent an Armed Merchant Ship loaded with already recruited militia to Jackson territory. In addition, the renowned Warrior guild of the Northern area, not far from here, 'Sword X' has also sent militia to Jackson."

"The Merchant and Warrior guilds?"

"If you add the Magic Institute, then doesn't it mean all 3 Great Guilds are making a move?"

"As expected, this wasn't an ordinary quest." The players chattered in surprised tones.

Ark had also seen information about the 3 Great Guilds on the message boards in each village. In New World, there was a concept of top guilds managed by NPCs. No matter the race or Kingdom a player had chosen to start in, they had to receive permission from one of these top guilds in order to start a guild. In other words, a guild started by a player was affiliated to one of the organizations, the top guild they had submitted their application to. So they had to pay a fee to the top guild if they

made a guild, but they also received various support and guild-exclusive quests in exchange.

The unique aspect was that the influence of these top guilds wasn't set in stone. The influence of the top guilds was similar to the market shares of Merchants. Therefore, the more users chose them, the stronger the top guild became.

Presently, the most popular professions with users in New World were largely these three: Warrior, Magician, and Merchant. New World's 3 Great Guilds were naturally decided as a result.

The top Warrior guild Sword X, top Merchant guild Midus, and top Magician guild Magic Institute!

Of course, when a user makes a guild, there's no need to choose the related guild in accordance to their profession. But if they had to choose, they might as well. There were many cases where the support or quest rewards from the top guild were valuable for a related profession. So a guild was chosen matching their profession. Thanks to this, the current 3 Great Guilds wielded influence second only to the royal family and the church.

The Mage continued to speak. "There is probably no need to repeat this, but saving Jackson is our first and foremost priority. But then again, it is also a battle where the 3 Great Guilds have put their pride on the line. Of course the status of the Magic Institute will change in relation to how well our militia fares in the battle. You will definitely be rewarded based on your efforts, so we hope everyone will do their best."

It was the reason why the 3 Great Guilds had scrambled to organize militia. Jackson Castle was the first place where players, who started in the Schudenberg Kingdom, changed their profession and became interested in guilds. If they raised their status there, then the allure of a newly formed guild would rise as a result.

Users were not the only ones competing with each other. NPCs also competed against other NPCs endlessly; that is New World.

However, users were not interested in the competition between the top guilds. All they wanted was experience and the rewards!

With the mention of the 3 Great Guilds, players conversed with very excited expressions.

"If all three Great Guilds are participating, then the rewards are bound to be huge as well."

"You might even receive a Magic weapon."

“I’m glad I leveled up like crazy these past few days.”

“I just dropped by Giran to clean out my bag, but to think I would get such a quest! Jackpot!”

The grander the scale of the quest, the larger the rewards.

But Ark was worried instead. ‘This isn’t something to be needlessly happy about. It just means there’s going to be more competitors.’

Even if one received the event quest from a different guild, the basic quest contents would be the same. In the end, the EXP and contribution points would have to be split with hundreds of users. As a result, the contribution he could earn would be reduced, so the reward would also inevitably fall. Granted, it would be easier to succeed in the quest with more people, but it wasn’t something to be needlessly happy about.

“There are only about 30 minutes until the airship arrives now. It may be small, but the Magic Institute has prepared some supplies for the people participating in the militia. Please come and get them in order. We couldn’t fully prepare since we were short on time, but it will be helpful.”

The Magician handed out supply boxes one by one. Upon opening, there were several items to be seen inside the box.

Intermediate Recovery Potions (3)
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Dozens of herbs mixed with a special technique, a highly refined magic potion. It is an essential item for warriors that can instantly heal wounds from battle.
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When used, it heals 300 Health instantly, but has no effect on disease or poison-like conditions.
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Highly Nutritious Biscuit (10)
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The highest grade of emergency food, made with plenty of highly nutritious ingredients. It doesn’t taste good, but it is rich in every nutrient, so even eating just one of them will make one feel full and satisfied.
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Increases Satiety and Health recovery by 50% for 1 min. If consumed with a drink, Mana Recovery increases by an additional 50%. However, only Satiety will be recovered if there is a status condition. Cannot be used in battle.
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#### Letter Movement Orb (Event Item)

A new mode of transport pioneered by the the Magic Institute's surprising technological prowess; when used at a Magic Institute sending tower, the body is converted into a letter and is instantly teleported to a designated receiving tower.

However, since this technology is still under development, it has many limitations and the physical burden on the user is considerable. Much more study is still likely required before it can be used.

Current set coordinates: Jackson – Giran

Number of uses: 1

The mage added a lengthy explanation. "The magic tower in Jackson cannot currently utilize its full functions. It is the reason why everyone has to use the airship. But if Jackson is protected and the Magic Tower gains its full power, you can use the Letter Movement Orb to quickly return to Giran."

In the end, it meant that if the quest was completed, they would take of the trouble in returning to Giran. Then again, hundreds of high level users milling through a low level area would create problems in terms of balance.

"The airship is coming from over there!"

Right after Ark put the supplies away, there was a commotion at one end of the balcony.

Ark's eyes grew wide when he reflexively turned his head around.

Set against the wide open, blue sky, a sparkling silver airship appeared.

"That there is the airship produced by the combined skill of the Magic Institute, Silver Arrow. It is 200 meters in length; not only can it fly at 300 kilometers per hour thanks to the 4 engines driven by powerful magic, but it is an all-weather aerial battleship with a gun also referred to as the 'Spear of Thor' installed. This Silver Arrow will take all of you to Jackson Castle."

With a proud look on his face, the Magician bragged about military secrets. But the name the Magician babbled and what Ark suddenly recalled were totally different.

'Hindenburg!'

Hindenburg was an enormous German airship, made in the 1900s. But unfortunately, it disappeared due to an explosion of unknown cause during the test flight; now it

was a legendary airship that could only be seen through old pictures wandering on the internet.

Well, that piece of trivia aside... in any case, the airship's basic form was the same as the Hindenburg. Shaped like a ship three to four times larger than a soccer field, the balloon at the top controlled altitude and the four engines at the bottom provided thrust.

However, those functions were the only similarity. The elegance of the Silver Arrow was so beautiful, it couldn't be compared to the coarse Hindenburg. Engraved into Silver Arrow was a complex, gilded pattern, and around it was a complex array of metal pipes one could only guess the use for. Like a surreal work of metallic art, it boasted perfect aesthetic beauty.

When the airship pulled in next to the balcony, the players swarmed aboard.

"We pray for your good fortune in war!" The Magician shouted loudly.

"Are all the militia on board?"

"Yes, Captain!"

"Alright, turn the Silver Arrow 30 degrees to port, the destination is Jackson!" Ordered the white-bearded captain, with a voice heavy with sleep.

Simultaneously, the air stirred on both sides of the airship as it moved and steadily changed direction. The nose pointed towards the southwestern Jackson territory!

"Quickly! The Warrior and Merchant guild militias left long ago. If we arrive late, the Silver Arrow will be a laughing stock. Set sail at top speed!"

Roaaaar... BOOOOM!

A roar burst from the 4 magic engines; befitting its name, the airship shot away like an arrow.

"Woaaaah!"

"Gasp, I, I almost fell off."

The users on deck fell to one side. If Ark wasn't holding onto the rail, he would have fallen into a pile with the rest of them.

"Muahahaha, hold on tight, you rookies. It's not my fault if you fall off." The captain's hearty laughter came from the steering room.

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‘This doesn’t feel too bad?’

A refreshing breeze fluttered his hair.

The airship going at max power raced across the continent at great speed. At first, he was taken aback by the speed. 300 kilometers per hour!

It might not be an impressive speed when flying, but the airship didn’t offer the same comfortable travel a modern airplane did. Sometimes gusts rocked the ship and the wind rushed in undeterred onto the unstable deck.

But once one got used to it, such things actually became strong points. The totally unobstructed view at the highest speed allowed one to amply enjoy the sense of liberation.

‘We already passed the Argus Mountains.’

As he gazed downwards, the mountains and fields zipped past by like a video fast forwarded times 4. It didn’t even take 40 minutes to fly across the same Argus Mountains he had struggled traveling through for several days.

Now, once they traversed the wide plains, Jackson Castle would soon be in sight. While Ark was thinking about it, the surroundings abruptly began to darken.

‘Eh? What’s this? There’s still a lot of time before nightfall?’

At first, it gradually darkened, as if there was fog, but their surroundings were soon covered in pitch-black darkness. Once they were confined within the black fog, there was suddenly a heavy feeling, as if gravity had increased. Perhaps because of it, the airship which sped forward at top speed, shook as it rocked.

At the same time, the users all got the same message.

The airship has entered the influence area of Dark Fog, which was created by an unknown magical power!

All players in the influence area will receive a Vision penalty and Stats will decrease by 10%. However, players of the Dark Attribute will not receive the penalty.

“What is this?”

“Dark Fog? Damn, stats are reduced by 10%?”

The people who quickly checked their stats spat out curses.

Ark also checked his stats. But thankfully, the penalty didn't apply to him, as he had the Dark Attribute. Rather, his stats increased from receiving the darkness bonus.

With the 20% stat boost from his profession's characteristic and the additional 10% from the 'Gift of Darkness' he'd learned in Giran, and since other users' stats had been reduced by 10%, Ark's stats were 40% higher than them!

'This is a good sign from the beginning. Is this Dark Fog the reason why the Magic Institute called them the Army of Darkness? If so, does it mean I get to keep my bonuses for the whole duration of the quest? Hehehe, it's at times like these that I feel like it was a good decision to choose the Dark Walker profession.'

Ark reveled in a strange sense of superiority. But while Ark was grinning, the surrounding situation was becoming quite serious. As the Dark Fog enveloped them, the crew became busy.

"Captain, we are losing power!"

"No need to panic. It's probably a move of the enemy to slow down reinforcement. Heh, it's laughable to try and stop Silver Arrow with a fog of this level. All hands to battle stations!"

"Yes, prepare Silver Arrow for battle, ready the Spear of Thor."

With a heavy clank of metal, the gunports all over the airship opened. Dozens of gun barrels rolled out from both sides. But what caught Ark's eyes was the enormous gun barrel that emerged from the gunport at the front.

Made of a silver metal, it was a gun shaped like a trident!

This was what the Magic Institute NPC had boasted of so enthusiastically, the Silver Arrow's main armament, the Spear of Thor.

As the airship readied itself for combat, the Dark Fog became even thicker. Since the visibility worsened, it was hard to make out objects even a few meters ahead.

"Turn on all the defense lights!"

As the countless lights on the airship turned on, the ground was illuminated. It was then that the faces of the users gathered on the deck became ashen with shock.

"Gasp, are all those monsters?"

"Aren't those monsters we've never seen till now?"

"Holy shit, do we have to fight them to finish the quest?"

There was an enormous number of monsters covering the ground underneath. It was hard to get an accurate number since they were far away, but there looked to be at least a thousand!

They also looked different from the monsters they had faced until now. Most of them were black humanoid monsters, while a few giant monsters reaching a few meters in height were also mixed in.

As the light hit them, they shot arrows and threw rocks.

“They are attacking!”

“Evade!”

The users who were stupidly looking down were slaughtered by arrows and rocks. For a level 60 user, an arrow or two didn’t do much damage. But because of the sudden attack, a scuffle broke out as the rest urgently backed away. In the panic, a few users fell overboard.

“Huh? S-sorry! ”

“Damn, you bastard!”

Users who fell were torn apart by the swarming monsters even before they hit the ground. The players’ faces turned gaunt. It wasn’t because of the gruesome deaths of their comrades. This quest was cut from a different cloth than the other quests. Not only did you fail the quest if you died, but you couldn’t even login for three days.

As the users were seized with fear, the captain snorted, “Pathetic squirts, there’s no need to be afraid. The pride of the Magic Institute, the battle airship Silver Arrow, is not so weak as to shake from such a weak attack.”

“Captain, all guns are fully charged.”

“Good. Give those stupid monsters a taste of Thor!”

“Yes, ready all guns for firing! Aim 30 degrees to the ground!”

With a mechanical whirr, the small guns and Spear of Thor pointed to the ground. The trident-shaped barrel moved into position with a buzz. A blue aura seemed to gather at the spear tip as it sparked. Then, it suddenly shook violently as an azure laser shot forth.

Flash! BOOOOOM!

A huge thunderbolt stuck the ground. It enveloped the ground with blue light with a radius of several hundred meters. The sparks spread along the ground, striking all the monsters in the area with massive electric damage.

“GRAAWR!”

Monsters directly hit by the bolt exploded instantly, and monsters hit by the sparks extending along the ground lost considerable health. Even monsters that seemed to be considerably high leveled were staggering, thrown into critical condition. Afterwards, the small guns also showered them with electric magic. The monsters who were close to death collapsed in disorderly groups.

A fearsome AOE attack!

The captain let out a cheer as he shook his fist. “Uhahaha, how’s that?! You arrogant bastards. This is the pride of the Silver Arrow, the Spear of Thor!”

‘Th-that’s awesome!’

The area was devastated by a single blow. Although it was probably just a pre-arranged scene, the visual impact was incredible.

They were anxious when the monsters first attacked, but if the airship’s force was at this level, it appeared this quest was just a simple event. However, it wasn’t like there was nothing for the users to do.

“The Spear of Thor takes 3 minutes to recharge. Until then, anyone who is capable of long-distance attacks, please provide cover from the deck.”

“Right, now is not the time to just sit around!”

“Those monsters are all contribution points!”

The users gathered their senses as their eyes gleamed. Soon, a massive counterattack began.

Among the militia, there were about 40 Mages and Archers; 40 people using magic and skills at the same time in the darkness was a sight to behold. In addition, there were 30 airship guns capable of continuous fire! Already in critical condition, the monsters literally melted. The Warriors also pitched in, pulling out throwing weapons and bows.

As soon as they started the counter attack, the badges on their chests sparkled continuously. The collapsing monsters were being turned into contribution points.

Thanks to this, Arks’ insides were burning. ‘Tch, if I knew it would be like this, I would’ve packed a bow and arrows.’

Even if a player weren't an Archer, they could still shoot a bow. Range and accuracy paled in comparison to an Archer, but that was no problem if one was going to shoot from the sky with a mass of targets left and right. But because he'd sold off all his japtem in Giran, Ark didn't even have a common wooden bow.

'No, let's not be hasty. This is just the start of the quest anyways. It's going to continue for 3 days so there'll be plenty of opportunities. Let's just do what I can for now.'

"Everyone, please do your best. We are the only ones who can rescue the trembling citizens of Jackson!" Ark ran about the deck using his Nursing skill.

There was no effect on people who had 100% health. But since the monsters counterattacked, most of the users were hit by arrows and rocks once or twice. As a result, they all received courage and vigor, which influenced overall fighting ability, an increase in stats, and a low level blessing. Thanks to the effects of Nursing, the attacks of the allies became stronger and more accurate.

However, the players just thought a Priest-related buff magic had been used.

"Huh? What's this? My stats went up?"

"This is the effect of a blessing. The chance of status effects went down."

"I don't know who it was, but thanks!"

- Contribution points have risen. Contribution +15.

Whether or not people noticed, his contribution went up.

'As expected! Even if I don't personally kill monsters, contribution points rise as long as I contribute to the battle!'

After checking the message, Ark's motivation soared. After that, Ark ran around the deck using Nursing like crazy. Since many users were affected in one use, it also gave a lot of contribution points.

Contribution quickly passed 100!

Since he was running around on the deck, he didn't have to worry about getting hit by enemy arrows either.

'Hahaha, this is like taking candy from a baby!'

During that time, the main gun finished charging and released another thunderbolt. The terrifying thunderbolt ripped through the darkness and bathed the ground in

blue. The several hundred meter AoE electricity damage, along with the chain attacks of users!

The monster swarm melted away terrifyingly.

"Hahaha, let's sweep the monsters like this!"

"The hell? They're nothing much?"

"I was nervous for no reason since they were new monsters."

"As long as we have the airship, this quest will be easy pickings."

The confusion had long since vanished from the users' faces.

Ark too was half filled with excitement, but there was something they were forgetting. That this quest's difficulty was a whopping ++C! There was no way the quest could be completed just by shooting arrows over the rail.

FWOOSH!

While everyone was concentrating on the monsters, an enormous mass suddenly cleaved the darkness as it flew in. The NPCs and players who reflexively raised their heads paled.

"Ack! W-what is that?"

A black flaming mass 10 meters in diameter!

Two black flaming masses, from which heat could be felt from meters away, came flying in towards them. Since all the lights were pointed to the ground, they had only noticed it when it was right in front of their noses.

"Th-those are flash bombs!" The captain burst out in shock. "To think that the likes of monsters would use flash bombs. Bosun, hurry and intercept it with the Spear of Thor!"

"We can't. The Spear of Thor is still only 50% charged."

"Dammit, did the bastards attack forcefully to aim for this?"

That was so, the land monsters were bait to draw the airship's attention, it was a plan to take out the airship with flash bombs during the time it took to recharge the thunder gun.

"Begin evasive action at full speed. All guns, Archers, and Mages concentrate firepower to intercept the flash bombs. We can't get hit by even one!"

The magic engines were soon at full power and the airship turned quickly. At the same time the guns and users loosed skills at the flash bombs like crazy. As they did so, the attacks from the monsters teeming on the ground became fiercer.

Several users collapsed from the arrows and rocks surging from below. But there was no time to look back at them. It was a situation where you could explode in midair with the ship at the drop of a hat.

TOOONG, BOOOOOM!

Under the onslaught of countless attacks, one of the flash bombs finally exploded in midair. An immense explosion and shockwave burst out and greatly rocked the airship.

The users who were about to unleash skills on the second flash bomb fell to one side. In addition, the aimed guns also fired electric magic at the wrong spot.

Decisive mistake!

“D-damn, all crew prepare for impact!”

BANG! BOOOM!

The flash bomb rammed into the stern of the airship and exploded.

The airship started to sway violently from the enormous shock. It was then that the two magic engines on portside burst into flames and combusted away.

The airship lost balance and started to spin like a top.

‘ACK, just what the hell is going on?’

Ark quickly grabbed onto the railing. However, the players who weren’t able to take action were flung up and swallowed up by the dark fog. Without a doubt, they were forcefully terminated.

“Shut off the magic power!”

As the captain shouted thunderously, the engines were all shut off. Thankfully, the spinning stopped, but the airship quickly lost altitude. The exploding of the engines had greatly damaged the hot air balloon, which maintained buoyancy. Since they also lost thrust on top of that, the impending result was obvious.

A crash!

Despair rose on the users' faces as the same thought occurred to them.

"It's the end!"

"Are we going to get wiped out like this even before we reach Jackson?"

"Why the hell is there a quest like this? Damn it!"

"This is all wrong, you can't even log in for 3 days if you die..."

If they went down with the ship, they would take tremendous damage. Even if you were to barely survive, the result was the same.

There were monsters swarming like ants along the airship's trajectory! If they were mobbed by them, they would be trampled to death without even a chance to pull out a recovery potion.

But the Captain didn't abandon his duty till the very end.

"Bosun, use all your strength to keep the Silver Arrow level. And send all power to the Spear of Thor. We'll raze the monsters with one final shot and attempt a crash landing. Even if we are to lose the Silver Arrow here, we must save even a few more of the militia and save Jackson!"

"Yes, sir!"

Thanks to the efforts of the crew, the terrifyingly shaking airship started to level out. But they were quickly losing altitude and were barely 20 meters above ground.

It was then the Captain shouted so loudly that the veins were popping out of his neck.

"Spear of Thor, all guns fire at once!"

As if it were opening its wings, electric magic poured from both sides of the airship. The concentrated magic power of the thunderbolt went along the airship's trajectory and scoured the earth.

BOOOOOOM!

Once again, it was truly a terrifying force. Even an ordinary gun was 10 times more powerful than a player's electric magic; when it struck the ground, dirt and gravel were charred black. The Spear of Thor was many times stronger than those guns and was something to be feared!

Only monsters in critical condition were left where the Spear of Thor streaked past. Once the guns showered attacks onto them, the swarming monsters shrieked as they were vaporized.

“We’ll prepare for an emergency landing now!” The Captain looked down on the users gathered on the deck as he said, “Warriors, this is all I can do. The Silver Arrow will now try a belly landing. The impact will be difficult for even a veteran warrior to endure, so escape before it’s too late. If you do survive, make your way to Jackson Castle. The surrounding monsters were cleared with the Spear of Thor and the guns, so I don’t think there’ll be great danger on the ground. I... I hope even one more person survives to save Jackson from danger!”

After the Captain explained the situation, he stood at attention and saluted.

The crew also stood and saluted the users. Although it was a really cool scene, the users were in a state of panic.

“W-what? Are we supposed to jump from here right now?”

“No way, if we jump from this high, chance of death is 100%!”

‘Stupid idiots, you still don’t get the situation?’

Meanwhile, Ark was climbing the rope ladder to the hot air balloon. It was inevitable for the airship to crash. If so, then there was no time to complain. Wasn’t it more important to find a way to reduce the damage by even 1%?

‘Considering the structure of the airship, the people on the deck will take the most damage.’

However, the place that would take the least damage was the hot air balloon on the top. This was a world made based the Middle Ages. There was no way the balloon would be full of helium. It would just be full of hot air. In other words, he could use it as a cushion.

There were quite a few players who had the same thought; dozens of people were clinging to the balloon while waiting for the right timing with nervous expressions.

CRAAASH!

After a few seconds, the airship collided into the ground. With an ear-splitting roar, an enormous shock crushed them. The hull crumpled instantly as the crew and users went flying in all directions. The hot air balloon also burst like a bubble and deflated.

‘Now!’

It was then that Ark threw himself off.

A peculiar sense of floating ensued as the ground rushed up before his eyes. Ark curled up and rolled forward.

## **Act 2 : To Jackson Castle**

“Whew... I’m alive, for now.”

Ark got up and checked his Health.

He had lost about 400 Health.

The Cat Knight special skill reduced the damage from the fall by 50%. His forward roll, which had utilized the Flexibility stat, further reduced the damage by an extra 30%. Even so, he took 400 damage, meaning the amount he should have taken was 2000 damage. Users without resistance for falling would have perished the instant they hit the ground.

As expected, he saw quite a few bodies lying around.

‘Ah, this is bad. It’s an absolute LARA zone.’

*[T/N: LARA is Licensed Agency for Relief of Asia, meaning that Ark’s surroundings look like a disaster zone.]*

A classic Tomb Raider Adventure Game he’d played a bit in the past came to mind. It was a game where a young, perfectly normal-looking girl named Lara dashed around finding treasure. When she fell from a high place every once in a while, it was a game over with the gruesome sight of twisted limbs.

The users scattered on the ground were exactly like that. Their bodies had to stay lying like that until the 3 days were up and they could login again.

‘I knew it wasn’t going to be an easy quest, but....’

After completing many unusual quests, Ark’s ability to judge a situation had become quick. There was nothing the players could’ve done about the airship crash. In other words, this was a scenario where users had no power to change the situation. It was clear that this fact was an inferable conclusion.

Receiving the quest was only possible at level 60. But receiving the quest and having the qualifications to participate in it were completely different. It meant the

minimum qualifications to truly start the quest were the ability to quickly judge the situation and one or two special skills to survive the airship crash.

‘What to do now...’ Ark took a moment to check his surroundings.

His surroundings were heavily clouded in darkness. The ground also had a rotten, mushy feel to it. This was probably also an effect of the Dark Fog.

Of course, something of this sort was no problem Ark. Once he cast Eyes of the Cat, his surroundings turned green and his vision brightened.

The night vision was an extra benefit of Eyes of the Cat.

‘Now, should I look for survivors, or...’

“Those who are alive, please gather here!”

Just then, he heard someone’s voice from one side. The dazed people hesitantly gathered around. There were more survivors than expected. But Warriors with high Health and defense were nowhere to be seen.

That was because the weight of the plate armor worn by Warriors caused them to take extra falling damage. The people with leather or cloth armor, such as Archers and Mages, took no extra damage, and their survival rate was increased with high Agility or lightweight magic spells.

There were about 40 survivors. 60 people hit the ground and were forcefully logged out.

The one who gathered the survivors was, of course, an Archer in leather armor and a feathered cap. He must’ve had a lot of experience as a leader, as he quickly took control of the situation and took the lead.

“You all are probably aware of the situation, the fall of the airship was a planned event. Getting to Jackson Castle was our first given task. Luckily, the Spear of Thor took out most of the monsters in the area. But there are going to be some monsters that survived, and more monsters are going to come. Since we still have the numbers, let’s make an attack unit and move to Jackson.”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

“Since there are currently many vacancies in parties, please remake your parties. Others, please use food to recover your Health and Mana.”

The people who survived were definitely quick at reading the situation.

They recovered Health while eating food, and checked each others classes as they remade parties. And with the Archer as the leader, the parties united into an attack unit.

However, Ark thought they were actually strange. 'What? Are these people in their right minds?'

After confirming the number of survivors, the first thing that came to Ark's mind was not Jackson Castle. Wasn't it obvious?

There were 40 users who survived. Which meant there were 60 corpses lying around the vicinity. So to say, there could be around 60 items dropped in this area.

Granted, since their alignments were neutral, or they were rookie users, the drop rate was not that high. But there were 60 of them. Even if there was only a 10% drop rate, it was 6 items... Plus, were they your average users? They were at least level 60 users. The chance the items inside their bags were worth a lot was very high. At the very least, the recovery potion in the supply box distributed by The Magic Institute was worth 20 gold if sold in a store.

'If I get lucky and even pick up an equipment item...'

An undisputable jackpot!

That wasn't all. There were still countless numbers of dead monsters from the Spear of Thor and naval gun barrage. Well, it was hard to expect much since most were completely destroyed by the guns, but there could be an item dropped by a monster. Shouldn't the very first thing a survivor should do be picking up such a lovely item? That was the duty and right of a survivor!

... At the very least, Ark thought as such.

However, it seemed like the other users hadn't thought that far yet. Of course, after going through such a traumatic event, there wouldn't be many users who would think of items first.

Maybe there were a few with the same idea, but it was dark, and one wouldn't know when the monsters would return... They would've thought there was no time to pick up items. But Ark was quite different, he was willing to risk his life even for one more copper.

'None of them are in their right minds. If they only cared about being alive, then why did they join the quest? Wasn't it because of the profit that they joined in on this quest? To ignore the items in front of their noses despite that and go running to

Jackson because they're scared of monsters that may or may not come... For me, I'd rather take the items and die!

Of course, this wasn't something to be said aloud.

'Hehehe, this is better for me. Yeah, all of you should leave. This guy will take all the lovely items for you.'

As soon as Ark made the decision, he quickly used 'Stealth'. Ark's body instantly became one with the darkness and disappeared. Thanks to that, the other users didn't notice Ark. They only thought of getting out of the place as quickly as possible. As such, they glanced around roughly, formed the attack unit, and headed towards Jackson Castle.

After checking to make sure the others were gone, Ark released 'Stealth' and summoned his Familiars.

"Dedric, Skull. Comb the vicinity. Search the areas where there are bodies of strangers particularly carefully. If you find any item at all, let me know immediately."

"Master, are you now going so far as to rob corpses?"

With an appearance of a little kid, Dedric looked at Ark with pity.

Dedric had started to talk back a while ago. It was because Ark wasn't used to hearing honorifics, and also because using honorifics in battle was inconvenient. But while allowing him to speak however he wanted, Dedric had started to crawl back to his bad habits.

"Do you want to eat some cooking, or do you want to search the corpses?"

"Hah, I get to try all sorts of things while living."

Dedric made his discomfort clear as he changed into a bat and flew off.

However, the loyal Skull rolled around searching the surroundings without a second word.

'It would been better if Skull had the ability to talk instead...'

It was such a pity.

As such, the one human and two Familiars worked hard at searching the corpses. But because the corpses were scattered in a wide area range, it took a lot of time.

How much time must have passed like that? While diligently searching the area, they finally reached the place where the debris of the airship was.

‘Ara? What is this?’

Suddenly, a black object next to the body of a Mage caught his eye.

At a casual glance, the shape wasn’t very different from a stone on the ground, but there was no chance that Ark, who had his eyes wide open so as to not miss a single japtem, would miss it.

As soon as he hurriedly picked it up, an information window popped up.

Fruit of Basium
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The Fruit of Basium, also known as the plant of dreams. Basium is a very rare, ancient plant found only in a part of the northern continent.
--

It is known to possess a violent nature and will move on its own to hunt animals and devour them when it grows. After it gets enough nutrients from hunting, the Basium will bear fruit once in tens, or hundreds of years.
---

If the Fruit of Basium is prepared in a special way, it will multiply the abilities of various reagents and magics. As a result, it was hunted indiscriminately by magicians of old, and now almost none are left. That is the reason why it is called the plant of dreams.
---

‘So this is a magic ingredient?’

Ark glanced at the Fruit of Basium with curious eyes.

A Warrior learned new skills through training and repetition. But a Magician had a different method of learning new spells.

The easiest method was to go to the Magic Institute and pay to learn a new spell. But the disadvantages to this were that it cost money and you could only learn common spells. In addition, they didn’t sell very many spells.

Because of this, in order to learn stronger magics, Magicians of a certain level spent day and night searching for ancient ruins. It was to find magic books left by ancient magicians. These magic books were stronger than the spells sold by the Magic Institute, and there were many unique ones.

In other words, just as a Merchant risked his life to trade in order to raise his market share, for Magicians, the ultimate goal was to find magic books holding stronger

spells. But the problem was that special magic ingredients were sometimes needed to learn the spells of such magic books.

Of course, magic ingredients necessary to learn powerful magic spells were traded at high prices.

‘If I’m lucky, I can get a pretty high price for this item. Isn’t this a good start?’

“Snake, pack this away,” Ark ordered without much thought.

However, Snake, who normally swallowed items without any problems, suddenly showed a strange reaction. It suddenly went into convulsions and collapsed.

“Huh? Snake, what’s wrong?”

Ss, sssss...

Snake, with great effort, lifted its head. As if it was trying to shed its skin, the scales of the area around its gaping mouth lost their elasticity and became wrinkled.

As Ark was panicking because of this bewildering situation, a new information window popped up before his eyes.

– Due to the Fruit of Basium, Alamone Larvae has started metamorphosis.
---

‘Eh? What’s this? Then, Snake really ate the Fruit of Basium? More importantly, metamorphosis? Then Snake can also grow up by eating food? Growth is growth, so what is metamorphosis? And metamorphosis has started?’

He totally could not understand what was going on. Then, a new message appeared again.

A new skill registration window for Alamone Larvae has been formed.
---

New Skill +?????
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Alamone Larvae can learn a new skill through the process of metamorphosis. However, the summoner must find out what kind of skill it is and how to learn it. You have a time limit of 20 days. If you cannot complete metamorphosis by that time, it will end in failure.
---

During the transformation process all of Alamone Larvae’s skills are sealed; as such, it will lose its item storage ability.
--

Ark stared at the window blankly.

Snake is learning a skill? He hadn't even imagined this.

'To think Snake can also grow through such a method. Is this an opportunity to be able to expect a greater role than a bag from Snake?'

To be sure, if a Familiar gained a helpful skill, using up one or two items wasn't a big deal. But he wasn't sure if he should call this good fortune or not.

'Well, I will be near Jackson Castle during the event quest, so not being able to use Snake as a bag shouldn't pose much of a problem...'

The problem was that Snake had to learn the new skill for the metamorphosis to succeed. Seeing as the transformation would fail if the skill wasn't learned within 20 days, it didn't seem like it wouldn't be learned on its own.

"How in the world—?"

If it was Skull or Dedric, he could try training their fighting techniques. However, Snake didn't even have any stats, let alone fighting ability. So what method was he supposed to use to learn what skill?

The situation was too sudden, so he couldn't come up with any ideas. In addition, he didn't have time to think of such things.

"Eek, g-go away! Aaack!"

"Kekeke, I will kill all humans."

He suddenly heard the sounds of someone being attacked from the rear of the wreckage.

Setting aside his thinking for now, he quieted his footsteps and went back to see a wounded NPC crew member. He was surrounded by three black monsters that Ark had seen from within the ship.

'There were surviving crew members?' Ark examined the monsters by using Eyes of the Cat.

They were naked black humanoid monsters, with a faces as smooth as that of egg demons, white pupils, and pierced lips. They were monsters that would come out of a horror movie promo poster; level 80 monsters named Shadow.

On the other hand, Ark's level was currently 68. But thanks to the Dark Fog's influence, the land was covered in darkness.

Within the darkness was the Dark Walker's battlefield!

His dark attribute bonus and the Gift of Darkness, gave him a 30% stat increase. Converted to levels, that was a whopping 20, so one could say Ark's current level was equivalent to 88.

This was the real power of the dark attribute.

When he was a beginner, it was hard to notice any great changes. However, attribute bonuses like this showed a greater effect the higher one's level was. At level 3, it was only a difference of 1 level, but at level 300, it was a difference of 100 levels!

"With this much, it's definitely worth a try!"

Ark immediately used 'Stealth,' approached a Shadow monster from behind, and then attacked at the nape of its neck.

– You have dealt a Critical Hit! As a bonus effect, Backstab will deal an additional 200% damage. Shadow will be stunned for 10 seconds.

"Skull, Dedric, Formation C!"

"Okay, looks like I get to stretch a bit!"

Clack, clack, clack!

Formation C, Skull attacked one Shadow together with Ark, while Dedric kept the others busy. It was the most effective plan to use when they were surrounded by enemies, and also the one his Familiars had the greatest success rate with by training through countless battles.

While Ark was locked in the blind auction house, they hadn't been able to fight. They were itching for action, so Skull and Dedric moved more actively than ever before. To be honest, Ark, who was thirsty for battle, was the same.

"Take 'em!"

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

A series of explosions ran along the Shadow's body at the spark-light sword attacks. It was Ark's specialty, dealing continuous critical hits.

The Shadow wobbled greatly as it stepped back.

After swinging his sword refreshingly for the first time in a while, vigor surged up anew. Stimulated by the rising thrill he felt, Ark pressed forward another step and thrust his sword.

At that moment– was that thing reaching out of the Shadow’s chest a hand?

‘Wha-what? What’s that?’

Ark reflexively raised his sword. With a sharp metallic sound, the arm bounced off.

Luckily, thanks to his instinctive defensive movement, he avoided a critical hit, but he still lost about 80 health. One couldn’t block an attack with a sword but rather can only reduce the damage. However, the problem wasn’t the damage.

‘What, these bastards? Arms popping out freely?’

It was an attack method he’d never even imagined. It wasn’t just the chest. Arms extended from the back, butt, and even the head of the Shadow, wherever needed, stretching several meters like rubber. Moreover, though it wasn’t like Ark’s 30%, it seemed that they too were receiving the darkness attribute bonus. Well, they were probably using the Dark Fog because it was beneficial for them...

‘And the dirt floor is rotten, so it’s slippery.’

Because of this, evasive actions were inevitably restricted.

“Wah! Master, this is crazy!”

Though he had flown off with great vigor, Dedric was also unable to deal with the stretching arms.

“Skull, go and help Dedric, we’re going with Formation B!”

Ark sent Skull to help Dedric and adjusted his grip on the sword.

The enemy was trickier than expected, and the terrain was also poor. Although it couldn’t be called the worst possible scenario, it also couldn’t be counted as the best. However, Ark’s eyes shone more brightly than before.

‘So I’ll have to fight guys like these from now on, right? Alright, I’ll be sure to warm up properly for you.’

After shaking his body and stretching his joints, Ark leapt in while swinging his sword. At the same time Ark’s taekwondo trained body started to show its true potential.

Ark, after making up his mind, was said to be determined!

All this time, Ark had never once neglected to exercise even while playing 18 hours a day.

That was how exercise worked. If you missed a day with an excuse, one day became two, three, four days of rest. Once you make up your mind and start, there can be no excuses, even if you can't sleep or have to skip a meal. Only by steadily adding up the sweat can you obtain the desired result.

"Come at me, you rotten egg!"

Ark's sword pierced the Shadow's vital point. As the Shadow twisted its body, another arm sprouted from its shoulder. An unexpected attack, but if you are expecting an attack from all directions, it can no longer be considered unexpected.

Not even being able to rapidly perform evasive movement because the ground was slippery wasn't a problem either.

'Without teeth, they're just gums!'

POW!

Ark knocked away the arm and let loose a sweeping low kick. Struck in the knee, the Shadow lost its balance and wobbled.

It was off-balance for only 1 or 2 seconds, but one who is trained in Taekwondo can kick at least 4 times in that span of time. He performed a low kick followed by a roundhouse kick.

The chance of a medium monster getting a bad status effect by a kick was 3%! The Shadow took a roundhouse to the jaw, fell into a confused state, and extended arms all over the place. It was actually harder to block such a haphazard attack.

He took considerable damage from the arms attacking from all directions. However, Ark wasn't one to stand still and take hits. The instant an arm was about to strike his shoulder, with a twist of his body, he back-kicked the Shadow monster for a Counterattack and killed it.

'Nice, not bad! The Shadow's darkness attribute bonus is only about 10~20%!'

If the enemy's level was the same or slightly higher, the odds were more than enough. Ark immediately ran at the remaining 2 Shadows.

Ark took advantage of the slippery footing. Accelerating with a slide, his frontal kick stuck the Shadow's stomach. With a cry of pain, it bent over at the waist. Once Ark started to attack, he showed no mercy.

If they were egg demon lookalike Shadows, there wasn't much left to say. Just knee them in their flattened, egg demon-like faces! Having knocked its head back, Ark's sword slit open the Shadow's throat.

"Ack, y-you human!"

Like a storm, the consecutive attacks brought the Shadow's health down to 50% in an instant.

'So they can't grow rubber arms since I'm not giving them time to breathe!'

"Skull, Dedric, Formation A. Let's finish this as quickly as possible!"

"Understood, Master!"

Skull bit the legs, Dedric used Dark Rush. With Ark's Dark Blade, the Shadow wildly took damage. Adding in the attack Co-op bonus with his Familiars, the Shadow's remaining life hit rock bottom and it collapsed.

"Keke, you're strong!"

Once two of them collapsed, the remaining Shadow quickly turned to flee.

"Where do you think you're running to?!"

Dedric snorted as he rammed into the Shadow's back with Dark Rush. An 'ack' sound was heard.

With a lump the size of a chestnut and tears dripping from his eyes, Dedric boasted, "Wa-wahahaha, how do you like the taste of that? I am the Dedric, noble of the Underworld!"

Clack clack, clack clack clack!

As if rather excited as well, Skull bounced about while landing strikes. The level 85 monster was getting beaten up by opponents 30 levels below them. With Ark striking continuous kicks and landing critical hits, the Shadows quickly fell into critical condition.

"Kekekeke! Hu-human... I may fall... but in the end, the day of rest will find you..."

“Ah, now I’m embarrassed, monsters should just simply die!”

Having changed into child form, Dedric pulled a face and stomped on the Shadow, which vanished with an aggrieved expression.

Ah, a rascal with no mercy...

In the beginning, Dedric didn’t have such a bent personality. However, he was steadily becoming similar to Ark in both actions and words.

In particular, only in the bad parts...

‘So this is why they say you shouldn’t even drink cold water in front of kids...’

*[T/N: Many Koreans believe that drinking cold water is unhealthy. Basically, don’t do unadvisable things in front of kids, because they’ll start emulating those actions.]*

Seemed like it was about time to pick a date for disciplinary action, but now wasn’t the time.

“Are you alright, sir?”

“Yes, thanks to you. Thank you.” The crew man who gave a sigh of relief was the Bosun.

“By any chance, are there any other surviving crew members?”

“I don’t know. I was with the Captain in the wheelhouse until the end...”

“And the Captain is...?”

The crew member shook his head with a dark face. “He passed away. I was in the wheelhouse, so if I survived, then there might be other crew members who made it. Please, I beg you. Will you go with me to find any other surviving crew members? As the bosun, I can’t leave my subordinates behind. But, since I am a stranger to fighting...”

Thu-thump, a quest window popped up.

Hero Assembly!
* Sub-quest: Rescue the Silver Arrow Crewmen
The Magic Institute’s airship, Silver Arrow, has unexpectedly crashed in the Jackson

region.

Though it was a disastrous accident that caused numerous casualties, the efforts of the Captain and crew members who were prepared for death were able to decrease the damage.

In a stroke of fortune among misfortune, Jabel, the Bosun, also survived. If he survived despite being in the wheelhouse, there may be other survivors. Jabel has requested that you to search and rescue the surviving crew. Rescue the crewmembers with Jabel and escort them to Jackson Castle. It will be an honorable act if you rescue those who have been completely abandoned.

Difficulty: E

‘A sub-quest!’ Ark snapped fully awake.

‘Hero Assembly’ was an event quest that gathered hundreds of users and spanned 3 days. Of course there would be many events during it. The sub-quests to complete such a task existed separately. One sub-quest could affect the chances of succeeding in the main quest.

‘A sub-quest exists. Then this means there’s a method to raise contribution points by myself.’

It was the same feeling as finding a clue to solving a quest.

“Hey, hey, aren’t you being too shameless? You’re demanding a gift after being rescued from dangerous waters. If you’re going to ask for a favor, you’ve got to offer some compensation. Who do you see Master as?”

Dedric interrupted without any manners.

Just how did he know Ark’s inner thoughts so well?

However, Ark put on the mask of a righteous man in front of NPCs!

Ark ignored Dedric’s comment and accepted the quest. “Please don’t pay any attention to what this brat said. I was able to survive thanks to the efforts of the captain and crew. Rescuing the crewmen is something that of course I must do. In order to make sure that no one loses their lives in a pitiful manner, I will search every nook and cranny. So please help me, Bosun.”

“Of course.”

Since it was a sub-quest, he would definitely get contribution in compensation. However, Ark had another ulterior motive in undertaking this sub-quest.

“Ah! Also, Bosun, please carefully search the bodies and give me anything you find. Although they are already dead, shouldn’t we take something back to their families?”

“Ah, indeed. I understand. Let’s do it that way.”

It was exactly this: the corpses of the players were spread out in a fairly large area. Even with help from his Familiars, who knew how long it would take. But with the Bosun and any surviving crew members they found, the search would end faster.

‘So, while doing the quest, I can also collect items. This is killing two birds with one stone.’

As Ark searched the area, he watched the Bosun from the corner of his eye with satisfaction. In the end, Ark was able to rope in an NPC as a free worker.

Dedric, watching from the side, exclaimed, “Oho, as expected of Master. How underhanded.”

“Shut it. I’m always saying this, but I go for the win-win.”

After 30 minutes of searching, they were able to rescue 10 crew members from the debris of the airship.

Of course, it wasn’t just a relaxing situation. On average, for every 3 he rescued he had to fight three or four Shadows. However, a battle was always welcome. In addition, there were crew members with fighting and healing skills. They weren’t of a high level, but as their numbers grew the fight with the Shadows became quite a bit easier.

“Ark-nim, I found this in the wreckage.”

“Ah. Great work. I’ll be sure to find someone who knows the person and return it to them.”

As Ark had instructed, the crew members gathered the user’s items and gave them to Ark. It was a shame, but the monsters destroyed by the Spear of Thor did not drop any items.

But the items the users had dropped far exceeded his expectations.

‘5 Intermediate Recovery potions, 1 Magic Tool Box, and 2 equips!’

“Information Window!”

Gauntlets of Strength (Magic)			
Armor Type	Steel Gloves		
Defense	50	Durability	3/60
Weight	50	Usage Restriction	Level 60, Warrior
High-quality steel gauntlets sold in the Merchant City, Giran, and specialized stores. Although they are mass produced, the seams are soft and have high defense, so they are loved by many adventurers. During the process of smelting the iron, drops of Ogre’s blood were added to give an effect adding to the wearer’s Strength.			
Option: Strength +10			

Norad Boots (Magic)			
Armor Type	Leather Shoes		
Defense	35	Durability	4/40
Weight	20	Usage Restriction	Level 65 or higher
Boots made from the leather of a legendary horse that only inhabits the northern region. They are among the masterpiece armor series made by the famous armor maker ‘Norad,’ who is known to have disappeared long ago. As fast as a gust of wind, the legendary horse’s strength still remains, giving an increase to the wearer’s movements.			
Options: Movement Speed +10%, Evasion +5%			

Both items were well worth 60-70 thousand Won (~\$600-\$700) if placed on auction.

‘Let’s put the gauntlets on auction right away and use the boots for now.’

He didn’t have any boots worth using besides the Sharkman’s Shackles anyways. Ark immediately used the Deluxe Tool Box to repair the boots, put them on, and of course, he didn’t forget to say a word to Jabel, who was staring at him impassively.

“I’ll only use them until I can find the people they’re related to. We need all the help we can get to guide everyone safely to Jackson Castle, you see. The deceased would definitely have wanted that as well.”

“Ah, yes... That’s right,” Jabel replied with a doubtful expression. However, the one protecting them was Ark. Perhaps because he was also angry after hearing that 40 players had run off to Jackson Castle without even thinking about searching for the crew, Jabel didn’t raise any other objections to Ark’s actions.

“Now, since we searched the entire area, let us head to Jackson Castle.” After feigning innocence, Ark led the crew through the Dark Fog.

Once they reached a certain distance away from the airship wreckage, the number of monsters increased. There were as few as 3-4 Shadows and as many as 30 of them in a mob. There were also mobs with the same large monster they had seen from the airship. Though they were similar to the Shadows in appearance, these monsters, called Hiptons, were 5 times larger and had rock-like skin. They were a whopping level 90! However, they didn’t pose much of a problem for Ark.

‘Hm, the attack group that left first must’ve suffered quite a bit.’

Ark followed the trail left by the first group. Thanks to the raid that had left first 30 minutes ago, monster corpses were piled up like mountains at regular intervals. They were marks of battles between the raid and the monsters that had ambushed them.

It was truly fortunate. Thanks to their desperate fighting, Ark was able to pass by without even fighting a single group of monsters. Ark just hummed while rummaging through the bodies.

“Snake, if you see any items I’ve missed, swallow them all.”

Perhaps because the raid group had been continuously ambushed, but they hadn’t picked up the item drops properly. However, Snake nodded feebly while grabbing an item and swallowing it, but it spat it back up with a painful face. Then it hung its head.

‘Ah, that’s right. It said it was in metamorphosis?’

During metamorphosis, Snake couldn’t swallow or spit out items. In addition, Snake was having a hard time just staying wrapped around Ark’s waist. That was probably the unexpected metamorphosis’ fault. Seeing the always charming Snake in such a limp state made him feel pity.

“Snake, until I figure out a way to solve this, do you want to go back to the Underworld?”

Hiss, hiss!

Hearing this, Snake violently shook its head as it tightened its grip on his waist and rubbed its head on him.

Well, Ark was no different from a parent to Snake. Since it was in pain, it didn't want to be separated from him even more.

"Okay, I understand. It must be hard, but just hang on a bit. let's find a way no matter what."

Once Ark used his Nursing skill with a sympathetic heart, Snake nodded with a rather brighter face.

'At least the Nursing skill works. Anyways, I feel sorry for Snake, but I can't leave this place for 9 days as long as I'm participating in the event quest. Haahh, it can't be helped. 20 days in game time is almost a week in real life. Fortunately, there's still some time to spare. I'll steadily look for a way after finishing the event quest.'

Ark blew a sigh as he stroked Snake's head. There was nothing more he could do for Snake. Plus, this wasn't a situation where he could pay attention to Snake.

Even though the raid group had passed through the area, there were still monsters left. Therefore, Ark moved carefully and sent Dedric to scout the area. Though there were still times they had to go into battle, they never had to fight more than six Shadows thanks to the scouting. With the help of the crew members, 6 Shadows weren't very difficult opponents.

"I will also help!"

"Let's get revenge for the Captain!"

If fighting broke out, the battle crewmen pulled out their daggers even without being asked to. The medic even ran over during the battle while taking hits from Shadows and bandaged Ark when he got injured. He didn't recover much Health when the medic applied first aid, but it was a significant help because it had a continuous effect.

"You're injured. I will treat you."

"You don't have to go so far..."

"No, you are fighting for our sakes, so I cannot leave your wounds unattended."

They repaid those who helped them no matter what. Ark couldn't help but like NPCs because they were like this.

After fighting around 15 battles, his EXP surged up. Although he fought with the crew, Ark got all the EXP since most of the damage was from him. Thanks to that, his EXP rose by 50% and he went up a level. The raid group that went ahead must've also killed many monsters, but since the EXP was shared among 40 people, they probably didn't get as much as Ark.

'The sky is dark! EXP and items are all over the ground! This is really a stage made for me!'

He felt sorry for Snake, but he felt like he could fly. But his pleasurable hunting ended upon reaching Jackson Castle.

Once they reached the castle gates, Jabel took Ark's hand with emotion.

"We are truly thankful. If it wasn't for Ark-nim, we would have pitifully lost our lives. I will never forget your kindness. Although we can only reward you with gratitude right now, we will notify the Magic Institute of your deed so that you can receive a just reward."

"I am happy by just being able to help you. Though of course, I won't stop you if you say you'll report it to the Magic Institute..."

\* The sub-quest 'Rescue the Silver Arrow's Crewmen' has been completed.

You have safely brought the crewmen who survived to Jackson Castle. They will never forget your dedicated help. The Magic Institute will also think highly of you for rescuing their precious staff.

Reward: 100 Contribution Points for every rescued crew member, +50 Fame, +100 Friendship with the Magic Institute.

The contribution one gets for killing a Shadow was just 10. Saving 12 crew members, on the other hand, was 1,200 contribution points. He received the same amount of contribution points he would have gotten from killing 120 Shadows. He even obtained the items dropped by users.

'Not bad, considering it's the first leg of the quest.'

After sending off his Familiars, Ark walked to the gate.

The event quest starts now.

\* \* \*

'Is this really Jackson Castle?'

Jackson Castle looked totally different from the memories he had of it a month and a half ago.

Thanks to the monsters' attack, the castle walls were in ruins here and there, and destroyed homes could be seen inside. The Lord's manor also showed signs of attack. With the area surrounded by darkness, it was as dismal as looking at a ruin.

'It's only been 2 days of in-game time since the attacks started and it's already this bad?'

Ark had fought alongside Jackson's Sylphid Knights before. Though they weren't able to defeat the boss of the ancient ruins, Debra, they were the strongest NPCs Ark had met. If the enemy did that much damage even though the Sylph Knights were fighting back, it meant the enemy was that numerous and strong.

'Well, all three top guilds sent reinforcements, so the quest will be completed one way or another... but more importantly, what should I do now? Do I join up with the Magic Institute? Or...'

Ark sent the crew members inside first and snooped around the gate.

Just then, he spied a group of users passing through the gate. Ark began to approach them in hopes of getting some information but then flinched as he stopped. He quickly retreated and hid behind a wall.

'How did that rascal...?'

One of the players walking in the middle of 10 others– he was one of the few users Ark knew of.

It was Andel!

The bastard who tricked Ark, who was then level 1, into losing 84 of his stats! Of course, he was caught by Ark afterwards, lost 128 of his stats, and flaked off. An average person would have already given up on the game at that point. No, he was certain he would give up on the game.

'Just how did that bastard join the event quest?'

Even considering that he could get his equipment back with money, did that mean he still reached level 60 after losing 128 stats?

In addition, if he was able to participate in an event quest, it also meant he was able to get rid of his Chaotic state. After Andel was caught by Ark, he realized how

fearsome the Chaotic penalty was. If he meant to continue playing the game, then he must first get rid of his Chaotic status.

‘It couldn’t have been easy... it seems he has suffered quite a lot all this while, hm?’

However, Ark’s eyes did not show a hint of sympathy.

Even though he had backed off after cutting 128 of Andel’s stat points, it wasn’t because Ark had forgiven him. It was just that he couldn’t waste any more time on the likes of Andel. It might be a different if Andel just gave up on the game, but if he was going to play, then he was still an enemy.

His promise that he would kill until Andel’s stats hit 0 if he showed up before Ark again were not empty words. If they had met again in a different place, Ark would have reduced him to 0, as promised.

‘But the bastard isn’t Chaotic now.’

Ark might be angry, but he wasn’t stupid enough to become Chaotic in the middle of an event quest.

‘Plus, I can’t even touch him right now because he’s with Bulma or other teammates. No, it would be rather disruptive if he were to spot me now. While the event quest is going on, it’ll be better to stay away.’

Just when Ark was thinking that, someone from behind suddenly spoke to him.

“Hey, were you the one who rescued the crew members?”

“Yes, it was I. And you are?”

The moment Ark turned his head, his eyes grew wide in surprise.

Surprisingly, Raymond was approaching him accompanied by Soldiers. He was the Alchemist of Jackson who was caught by Ark while secretly raising a Crystal Golem to treat his son’s illness.

“Raymond?”

“Oh, so it *was* you! I came running over when I heard the name of Ark from the crew members.”

“How did you...?”

"I am ashamed. Actually, right after you left, I surrendered myself to the Lord. But when the Lord heard my circumstances, instead of punishing me, he made it so I could live while serving Jackson. And now, I've been temporarily entrusted with the work of managing the volunteer troops. Certainly, I'm still a prisoner, but thanks to you and the Lord's grace, I am able to proudly straighten my shoulders and care for my son."

"That's good, I'm glad." Ark smiled broadly as he held Raymond's hand. Raymond had worried him as he left Jackson, but it seemed things had worked out better than expected.

Those who sin must be punished. It was obvious, but sometimes there was room for sympathy. Could anyone stone a person who committed murder in order to save his son? At the very least, a person who valued his family more than others wouldn't be able to throw the stones.

Of course, Ark's affection towards Raymond was due in no small amount to the rare scroll 'Magic Restoration'. It was truly one of the skills he made really good use of.

"I feel like I have been relieved of some heavy burden thanks to your words. My heart has been heavy every day because it didn't look like I was able to keep the promise I made with you."

"There's no need to think like that. There is no rule that says one must pay the price of sin with suffering alone. I think the Lord judged wisely as well."

"I've already heard about the relationship between you and the Lord; even after Jackson was attacked, the Lord occasionally mentioned you. No, this is no time for idle prattle. The Lord would be glad to see you. I'll take care of the registration process for the militia, so you go visit the Lord."

"Alright."

Ark immediately went towards the Lord under the escort of guards.

"What, who's that guy?"

"How is he going straight to the Lord's Castle right away?"

"Maybe he's a user with extremely high Fame?"

The users whispered amongst themselves while watching Ark receiving VIP treatment as soon as he arrived at the castle.

It was only natural that he drew their attention. There were very few people who received such treatment from NPCs. It was a benefit only for those with incredibly high Fame or people who had raised Intimacy to the limits by completing a special quest. Of course, Ark wasn't at all happy about their interest in him. It would be troublesome if he caught the eye of Andel.

In any case, once Ark entered the Lord's castle, the young Lord's eyes became as wide as saucers.

"You... Ark! You're Ark!"

"Have you been well?"

"Haha, I can't really say that..." The Lord smiled weakly and sagged his shoulders. "Anyway, you have come."

"How could I not come after hearing that Jackson Castle has met a crisis?"

"Yes, I believed you would surely come."

"However, the situation looks worse than what I heard."

"Indeed."

The Lord nodded with a heartbroken expression. "It is as you said. The situation is very serious. Since you have arrived, you must have been riding the airship sent from Giran. Am I right?"

"Yes, it was dangerous because we were intercepted during our journey, but I was somehow able to survive to Jackson Castle."

"I see, even after suffering many difficulties, thank you for not giving up on Jackson and coming. As your friend and as the Lord of Jackson Castle, I express my thanks to you. My heartfelt thanks go to the brave Warriors who were sacrificed while participating in the militia."

Comfortable. The first feeling Ark registered while talking face to face with the Lord was comfort. Ark did not feel the slightest pretense in the young Lord's tone. If a person did something worth being grateful about, he expressed his heartfelt thanks, and he sincerely sympathized with those who perished. It was such a natural response, but the same natural reaction was hard to find among players. Maybe because this was a game, it was considered acceptable to not act earnest.

But perhaps because Ark hadn't been able to experience many virtual reality games, there were many times when NPCs felt like real people. Was that why? Now he was more comfortable talking to NPCs than to users. Unlike unpredictable users,

conversation with NPCs unfurled in orderly fashions. At least he didn't need to worry about what to say to them.

"Your words alone are surely enough to comfort the fallen, my Lord."

"That is all I can do. In any case, the crash of your airship is an incident that explains Jackson's current situation. After all, we weren't able to send out rescue parties despite knowing your airship was intercepted. Furthermore the airship was not the only one that took a surprise attack."

"Not only the Silver Arrow?"

"As you likely know, all three great guilds come forward and sent militia to Jackson. The 3 great guilds mobilized their most superior weapons. However, they were all defeated one by one while on route like the airship."

The young Lord began to explain the gist of the situation.

The unidentified army of monsters attacked Jackson Castle 2 days ago, which was 16 hours ago, last evening, in real time. The sky was suddenly engulfed by Dark Fog as the army of darkness attacked. Without any time to take control, they were dealt a huge blow.

"Many of the foreigners who were dedicated to hunting around Jackson Castle perished. Still, the good thing was that the foreigners who survived combined their strength with the Soldiers and finally blocked the attack. Then, before we were completely engulfed in the Dark Fog, we urgently sent an SOS from the Magic Tower to Giran."

That was the magic signal Ark saw in Giran.

The 3 great guilds all received requests for help. They responded quickly and decided to send militia. The first to arrive were the ones sent by the Merchant Guild. The representatives of the Merchant Guild cut through the Jackson principality aboard the ironclad merchant ship, Prize. After getting close to Jackson Castle, they planned on beginning their large-scale landing operation.

"So they failed."

"That's right, it seems that the monsters knew that the SOS was sent from the magic tower. As soon as the Prize crossed into the Jackson principality boundaries, they were ambushed by the monsters lying in wait and sank. Among the 100 militia on board, 60 or so were lost with Prize, and just this morning, some 40 survivors arrived."

As expected, not all who participated could reach Jackson Castle. There was a trial prepared for each guild, and only those who passed could participate in the actual quest.

The Merchant Guild and Magic Institute were both in Giran, so the level of the militia was similar. That's why the number of survivors from the airship was also similar to the number from Prize.

"Then the Warrior Guild's militia must have also received a surprise attack."

"Yes, but fortunately, the Warrior guild did not receive much damage. Though they were ambushed, 70 survived and arrived at Jackson a few hours ago. They say it's thanks to the famous Warrior who led the battle. He's the Holy Knight, Alan, who we've heard of several times even in Jackson Castle."

*"Alan!"*

Ark's felt like his mind was splashed with cold water.

Alan... His name was unforgettable in another sense than Andel's. Ever since Ark met him, he had felt an ever present thorn of discomfort in playing the game.

He was the first to make Ark feel so frustrated. He was also the one who had made Ark feel like Lariette had been snatched from him. And he was the reason why he took the first step towards being a gamer for a living.

'So *that* guy is also participating in this quest!'

He had encountered competition in an totally unexpected place.

His feelings were mixed after hearing Alan's name. He knew an opportunity like this would come one day, and as candidates of Global Exos, it was unavoidable anyways. However, Ark was not yet ready to compete one on one with him.

Not yet... That's right, it wasn't time.

If they met when he wasn't ready, it was very likely that Ark would just come to feel the same frustration as before. The stronger Ark's desire to win against him was, the greater his frustration would be.

"Besides, if Lariette is still with Alan..."

More than anything, he didn't want to be humiliated again in front of Lariette.

As Ark's expression became grave, the young Lord asked with a quizzical voice, "Do you know him?"

"Yes, a little..."

"I see. Then I'll continue what I was saying. Raymond is reorganizing the militia sent by the 3 Great Guilds to form a temporary force to guard the exterior. Sir Alan has been put in charge of commanding them on the field."

"Entrusted to Alan?"

"He is a Holy Knight recognized by the Cathedral. It should come as no surprise considering the Fame he has garnered."

This was why users were obsessed with Fame.

If your Fame was high, then you didn't really have to bother with raising Intimacy. With Fame alone, you received VIP treatment no matter where you went, and there were cases where NPCs went looking for you after hearing rumors to request quests. In addition, you could also be personally bestowed a title from a famous guilds or royalty. Whether you had it or not, it was an absolutely necessary value for Knights, Merchants, and professions like Scholar alike in progressing through the game.

The main characteristic of Ark's chosen hidden profession, Dark Walker, was the dark attribute bonus. Meanwhile, Alan's main characteristics as a Holy Knight were Faith and Fame. Disregarding his original character, Alan was a faithful, sacred Knight in the game. Therefore, even by doing the same quest as other people, Alan received bonus Faith and Fame.

Faith showed its power when dealing with monsters, and Fame could win the right to be entrusted an advantageous role when a big event like this occurred.

'If he's registered as a commander in the system, he'll get more contribution points and experience points as a bonus. Damn, does that mean it'll be hard to win more contribution points than Alan in this quest?'

This was a fact Ark had learned recently learned, but the path of darkness the Dark Walker tread was the opposite of Alan's— Ark suffered a Fame penalty. It was intended to balance his profession.

However, Ark was able to obtain almost as much Fame as other users thanks to successful miraculous treatment with Nursing.

‘There’s no point in thinking of such things now. All I have to do is raise my Dark Walker my own way. Just as our chosen paths are different, there may be things I can do that Alan can’t.’

“Sir Alan failed the Taresha Labyrinth expedition twice, so his Fame isn’t as great as before, but there was still no one in the volunteer troops who can match him. Also, he is working as hard as we expected.”

‘So he failed that time when he said he was going to the Taresha Labyrinth!’

Ark was able to receive unexpected information from the young Lord.

If so, then Alan wouldn’t have been able to raise his level and Fame by much. That in and of itself was good news, but Alan would be desperate to make up for the failure with this event quest. Looking at this quest alone, he couldn’t say it was really good news.

“Well, Sir Alan’s situation aside, this is the current line of defense. After conferring with Sir Alan, we put the volunteer troops in the defense line.”

The young Lord called attention to himself and spoke while pointing at a map of the Jackson principality.

Alan split the volunteer troops into 3 platoons. He assigned Platoon 1 to the front gate, where the enemy attacks were the fiercest. Platoon 1 was likely the one Alan was personally leading. Platoon 2 and 3 were placed on the sides to assist Platoon 1.

‘With this placement, Alan and Platoon 1 will definitely get the most contribution.’

Was that all? Giving and denying contribution points to each platoon or user all depended on Alan’s whims. Of course his first priority was going to be himself. Alan had seized the top spot right from the get go of the event quest with his high Fame.

‘Alan...’

While participating in the quest, Ark had never even hoped to take the top spot. But after finding out there was no chance at all, he lost all motivation. What’s more, to think his opponent was Alan...

Besides the volunteer troops, a group called the militia were participating. The militia was comprised of users who were in Jackson at the time of the ambush; they got the event quest from the young Lord and not from the 3 Great Guilds. But since they were all low level, they were being used as reserve troops.

“The assignment of the volunteers has been entrusted to Sir Alan, but you are an exception. Speak if there’s a platoon you desire. I will confer with Sir Alan to make it so that you are assigned the platoon you want.”

Ark briefly looked at the map and pondered.

Considering EXP and contribution points, Platoon 1 was the best. But the commander of Platoon 1 was Alan; even if Ark couldn’t obtain a decent reward, he couldn’t find it in himself to take orders from Alan.

platoons 2 and 3 were also in a similar situation, as they were also under Alan’s direct command. In addition, even if he were assigned to the front lines, it would be difficult to gain the contribution he needed if he wasn’t put in an attack squad. Furthermore, if he ran into Andel or Bulma, there was no telling what the outcome would be.

Whichever he chose, neither were desirable.

‘Is there a way I can raise my contribution while fighting independently?’

After thinking a while, Ark asked the young Lord, “Where are the castle troops fighting?”

“The Sylphid Knights left the defense of the front gate to the volunteer troops and are out blockading the enemy’s supply line. Defense isn’t everything– striking the enemy is the true mission of the Sylphid Knights. The Jackson guards are guarding the back gate.”

‘That’s it!’ Ark’s eyes flashed.

Jackson’s soldiers were NPCs. If he were to fight alongside them, he wouldn’t need to worry about Andel or other users. He also wouldn’t have to worry about being sandwiched in the midst of many users and would have many chances to gain EXP and contribution points.

Regretfully, the scenario of hunting with the Sylphid Knights was not to be. Well, if the powerful Sylphid Knights participated in the defense line, there would be a problem with the quest difficulty balance. However, the Jackson guards were also NPCs that Ark was very familiar with.

“I would like to guard the back gate along with the Jackson guards.”

“You will?”

“Yes, as you probably know, I am well acquainted with the Jackson Soldiers. Rather than mixing with strangers, I would be more comfortable with the Jackson guards with whom I have shared my heart.”

“But... The back gate they are currently guarding is not a very safe place. The number of enemies and frequency of attacks are low compared to the front gate, where monsters attack relentlessly, but there are only 30 Jackson guards left. Compared to the main gate which is being guarded by about 140 volunteer troops, the back gate is more dangerous.”

“My Lord.” Ark gazed at the young Lord with blazing eye and spoke forcefully. “Jackson Castle is a second home to me. In addition, you called me a friend, my Lord. How can I desire safety when Jackson Castle is in the midst of a crisis? If protecting Jackson Castle is dangerous, then that is fine. Even if I were to perish while guarding it, that is what I desire. I beg you, please let me do so.”

“Ark, you’re really.....!” The young Lord struggled with his emotions.

Even the guard captain, Cross, who was listening in from the side was overcome with emotion.

“Milord, I also ask this favor. If the righteous foreigner Ark who was acknowledged by the late lord were to help, it would raise the morale of the guards. Please grant this request. I will swear to protect him from harm.”

“Fine, although a foreigner participating in the guard force is unprecedented, Ark fought the devil with the Sylphid Knights before. And if it’s you, who loves Jackson more than anyone, you have the right to do so. Sir Cross, Ark is my friend. I leave him to you.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Cross firmly nodded, a message window popped up.

– Art of Communication has risen by 5.
--

The Art of Communication stat was of crucial help.

‘Hehehe, the way to solve this quest is becoming clear at last.’

Like that, Ark was able to participate in the battle without coming to the attention of the other users.

## Act 3 : Jackson Crusade

“Kekeke, attack! Sweep them away without leaving a single human behind!”

Once again, a group of monsters swarmed towards the back gate.

“It’s the enemy. Everyone prepare for battle!”

At Cross’ order, soldiers who had been taking breaks rose urgently. Then they clashed with countless metallic clanging noises!

As the young Lord had said, it was definitely not easy to defend the back gate.

A legion consisting of dozens of monsters came to attack the back gate at regular intervals. Though they weren’t at the level of the Sylphid Knights, the Guard demonstrated abilities matching players at level 80 or so. In addition, their equipment was considerable, so their attack and defense were also quite good. Alone, they could easily take down one or two Shadows, but there was a problem.

In terms of composition, battle ability, and strategy, the Guard was a long ways off from the Sylphid Knights.

First of all, the Guard’s composition wasn’t as good as that of the player raids. Unlike the player raids, which were evenly made of Warriors, Archers, Magicians, and Clerics, the guard force only had Warriors and Archers. Therefore, when the enemy was upon them and they didn’t even have a strategy, charging in while swinging their swords was the whole of it.

It was no wonder that there was a considerable loss of Health with each round of battle.

The second problem was, even though they had lost that much Health, there wasn’t a Cleric so there was no way to recover properly. Thanks to that, they had to apply first aid or eat food to recover Health after the fighting was over. There were many cases along the way where they had to fight a monster legion before they were done recovering. A battle with lacking skills took a long time, and since it took long, the guard force had to fight again before their Health was 100% recovered. They were caught in a vicious cycle. Still, they were able to endure thanks to the powerful equipment that had been bestowed upon the guard NPCs.

“This is a fight where everyone is holding on with their enormous defense and Health.”

But Ark wasn't supported with as much defense and Health as the Guard. If he faced monsters by throwing himself into battle like they did, he would soon meet his end.

"Finishing off the weak monsters while the guards are protecting themselves with shields will be good."

Ark faced the three or four Shadows that had lost most of their Health and had been pushed to the rear. However, even that required much caution. NPCs also leveled up when they accumulated EXP, and if their contribution went up, they advanced to a higher position in society. Of course they were greedy for EXP and contribution. Fortunately, they didn't openly state their complaints since his intimacy with them was high, but they stared at him uncomfortably when he snatched monsters with rock bottom Health.

"My place with them will disappear if my intimacy with the guards falls."

Ark felt the crisis of the situation and decided to abandon his blazing greed.

After several battles, he began to see a rough compromise.

When he picked off monsters with 50% Health left, the guards showed no obvious reactions.

"Hey Ark, don't push yourself too hard."

Rather, they occasionally even encouraged him.

"Alright, so they overlook this much! Now there's no need to worry."

Once he was certain of the limit, Ark began to move briskly. Ark's sword cleaved the darkness like a flash.

The Shadows that had already lost half their Health were put down with three or four critical hits from Ark. Ark kicked wildly in all directions and let loose Dark Blade to exterminate the monsters.

There was no need to worry too much about his Health and Mana. After fighting until he fell into critical condition, he backed off when it grew dangerous and ate food. The trusty guards were holding up the front, so he could leave it to them and take a break. This was something he wouldn't have been able to do if he had been fighting with players.

While fighting like that, a new message window appeared.

The skill 'Indomitable Will' has reached 100 points in skill proficiency and has increased to Intermediate.

Indomitable Will (Intermediate, Passive): Overcoming innumerable life and death situations have made your courage even more unwavering. The concentration ability that shines during a crisis has become one level stronger.

In a crisis, Critical Hit Chance will increase by 40% and Regeneration ability will increase by 10%.

Indomitable Will was the first skill Ark had learned.

Indomitable Will was a skill that only activated in critical condition. The skill had stopped growing because Ark grown to a point where he rarely reached critical condition. Even so, he couldn't purposefully fall into critical condition to raise the skill since there was no knowing what kinds of situations would arise while hunting alone. However, it was a different situation when the guards were backing him up like now.

'Indomitable Will finally reached Intermediate. Now is the chance to raise skills. Indomitable Body doesn't have much left either, so I should use this opportunity to fall into critical condition more often. But if I'm going to approach the jaws of death, wouldn't it be good to raise intimacy as well?'

"Dedric, Skull. There's no need for you guys to participate in the battle. Patrol the area and assist any guards at risk!"

"Understood, Master."

Ark had Dedric and Skull meticulously check the battle situation. Then he was able to quickly run in front of guards in critical condition who were in danger.

Just then, he glimpsed a guardsman who was under concentrated attack from monsters riding lizards, evolved versions of Shadows called Avengers.

"Kekeke, die. Human!"

"Stop, ACK!"

Ark's Health plummeted from taking a critical hit by a lance.

"Oh, Ark!"

"Please go, I'll take it from here!"

"Th-thank you."

"Your opponent is me!"

"Kekeke, you took a hit for another, so is this the insignificant humans' code of chivalry?"

The Avenger lunged in as it jabbered in a derisive voice.

"Dedric, now. Cover that guy's eyes!"

Dedric flew in quickly and unfurled both his wings to cover the Avenger's face. Then Ark grabbed and hurled Skull at the Avenger's face, making it stagger and sway. At that moment, Ark leapt onto the charging lizard's body and loosed a lethal move.

"Dark Blade!"

The Avenger took a considerable blow from the defense-ignoring attack and rolled off the lizard's back. Ark showered the Avenger with kicks and sword attacks as it staggered to its feet!

Of course, since he had to raise his skill points for the Indomitable set, he didn't forget to get hit a few times. Then, as soon as Indomitable Will and Body were activated, he immediately dealt a Dark Blade and ended the Avenger's life.

- You have defeated Avenger and saved your teammate from a crisis. Contribution +20 (+10)
---

'Added contribution points!'

He was granted bonus contribution points since he took down an enemy after taking a hit for the guardsman.

That wasn't all. When he fought while saving guardsmen like that a few times, there was a change in the way the guardsmen looked at Ark. From simple familiarity to respect...

"Thank you, I survived thanks to you."

"You are indeed Ark. I'll be happy to die for your sake!"

As the knights grew to respect him more, Ark's restrictions became less strict. They didn't complain even when he snatched monsters with about 40% Health.

'Is there still room to raise intimacy more with the guards?' Ark's eyes were shining.

Only then did he catch onto the rough sense of what he had to do.

When it became Ark's time to rest, he made Survival Cooking food without sparing his ingredients. Health recovery was manifold faster than normal food, and it even granted additional effects!

"Ah, after eating this food, my fatigue seems to have somehow flown away."

"Somehow, it makes me feel like I can run 100 meters in 10 seconds."

"And the taste is delicious as well."

After only eating dried rations for several days, the guards spoke up with energetic faces. Moreover, their stats increased and their recovery rate quickened, so it was easier for them to face the swarming monsters as well.

Next, Ark turned his eye on repair.

The guards had toolboxes, but they had to hammer away at their equipment for a long time to make repairs. But Ark's Magic Restoration was instantaneous!

"Bring me all the broken equipment!"

Ark drank the Mana restoring Herb Tea during breaks and quickly repaired the guards' equipment. The attack and defense of the soldiers' equipments were exceptional, but they were all Common equipments. As a result, the guards rejoiced when Ark repaired their equipment without penalties to the durability.

"Thank you, to think that repair would be done so quickly. Now fighting will be much easier."

"Consider this as thanks. It's easier thanks to you, so please take it."

When he completed a set number of repairs, Cross even pulled out a spare tool box and gave it to him. Though they were just common tool boxes, each one was worth 10 Gold!

Was that all? His skills went up, and since he was contributing to the battle with food and repairs, he received additional contribution points. At the same time, his intimacy surged up, so when he dealt the last blow on monsters in critical condition or even snatched up items from a monster felled by another soldier, they didn't gripe about it.

Once he got the ball rolling, it was smooth sailing from there. After repeatedly fighting in battles where he recklessly fell into critical condition, Indomitable Body soon became Intermediate. Both Indomitable Will and Body had only had 7 skill points left to fulfill, so it hadn't taken much time.

Indomitable Body (Intermediate, Passive): As a great warrior, countless wounds and agonies have made your body even stronger. Your increased defense will shine in a difficult situation.

In a crisis, defense and Critical Hit Evasion will increase by 40%, Regeneration ability will increase by 10%.

\* As a set effect of Indomitable Will and Body, you have learned "Adrenaline."

Adrenaline: A true Warrior will not feel fear in a critical situation. Rather, their intense excitement will release adrenaline and make them forget fear and fatigue. Now, when you face a crisis, adrenaline will be released and you will be able to bring out the most of your body's ability.

In a crisis, +50% Immunity to Fear, Reaction Rate +20%.

'I finally raised both of the Indomitables in the set to Intermediate!'

When he set a goal and aggressively pursued it, the skill growth was also fast.

The effect of Adrenaline was incredible. Once he fell into critical condition, all his senses sharpened, making him feel as if the enemy was Slowed. Naturally, it was much easier to avoid the enemy's attacks. Also, his attack speed increased, letting him make six attacks in the time it had taken to make five. With the Indomitable series effects added on top of that, his fighting power skyrocketed. After about three or four hours of fighting, he was even able to match his breathing with the guards.

"Everyone, be strong! Only we can defend Jackson Castle!"

"OOOHHH!"

The Nursing skill he occasionally used also had a great impact. Their spirits uplifted, the soldiers fought monsters even more powerfully.

In order to maximize hunting efficiency, Ark occasionally stepped out of battle to receive side quests from Raymond. Raymond, who was in charge of the volunteer troops, commissioned him small quests.

"It will be a great help in protecting the castle if you defeat about fifty Shadows."

“Avengers are platoon leaders that lead the Shadows... if you defeat them, we’ll be able to shake their chain of command.”

“You’ve seen a Hipton before, right? They’re giant monsters holding hammers or iron bows. They say three or four Hiptons are advancing to attack the castle walls. Please stop them.”

The side quests had simple narratives, like the above. When he completed a quest, his EXP, contribution, and a value called operation performance evaluation went up. At first, he didn’t know what the operation evaluation value meant, but after completing about ten quests, he grasped the gist of it. He received harder quests with higher operation performance evaluation value.

However, players didn’t take quests despite knowing that they were available. Firstly, the rewarded EXP and contribution points were scanty, and in the raid, it was too eye-catching to go all the way to the front gate to receive a quest alone.

On the other hand, with the NPC guards, taking quests was quite favorable for Ark. Sometimes, they even put themselves in danger to help Ark complete a quest. Thanks to that, Ark was able complete quests much more easily and accumulate additional EXP and contribution.

‘The penalty for raising contribution points alone is gone. No, it’s actually a hundred times better than an average raid. Since more than anything, I can fully place my trust on the NPCs.’

Just 5 hours after Ark joined the guards, he leveled up 2 times.

Character Name	Ark	Race	Human
Alignment	Good +100		
Fame	750	Level	71
Profession	Dark Walker		
Title	Cat Knight, Soul Caretaker		
Health	1,415	Mana	1,125 (+100)
Spiritual Power	100	Strength	178
Agility	218 (+17)	Stamina	268
Wisdom	27	Intelligence	216
Luck	43	Flexibility	17
Art of Communication	23	Affection	23
Special Stat: Knowledge of Ancient Relics			63

Equipment Effects
Black Bear Mouse Leather Armor: Agility 2, Frost Resistance +20
Cat Paws: Attack Speed +10%, Agility +15, Critical Hit Rate +10%
Crystal Golem's Head: Mana +100
Norad Boots: Movement Speed +10%, Evasion +5%
* All abilities will increase by 30% in the dark.
* You have the ability to hide in the darkness (15 minutes duration. Cancelled when you get into combat).
* Resistance Fear, Darkness, Blind, and Seduction spells is increased by 50%.
* You can bring out the true abilities from all types of tools.

However, his time hunting with the guards reached a totally unexpected deadlock. After 6 hours, the guard commander, Cross, spoke with a fatigued face, "Today, we'll head back in around now."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Since they've charged in for awhile, the monsters will be quiet for a bit. And the guards are all tired. If we don't get proper rest, we won't be able to endure tomorrow's battle."

It was a problem of fatigue. The concept of time was different for NPCs. For a player, a full day was 8 hours in real time. A player could push themselves to stay up a few nights and wage battle. So when there was a lull in monster attacks, players went out looking for monsters to hunt.

However, 6 hours to a player was 18 hours to an NPC. In addition, unlike users, NPCs felt fatigue and the pain of being injured realistically. Even if they recovered their Health with food or potions, their fatigue did not also disappear.

"With the situation as it is, we won't be able to get sufficient rest, but since we've passed one round of the enemy's attacks now, we'll be able to rest until dawn. Since you have also pushed yourself quite hard, you should at least get a bit of shut eye."

"... I understand."

Those words were like pouring cold water over his rising spirits.

However, even Ark couldn't impose a tighter schedule on the guards.

'So that means for every 6 hours, I have to fight alone for 2 hours.'

But the monsters that attacked the walls came in legions. They were difficult opponents for Ark to deal with alone. Even so, he couldn't ask to squeeze in with the attack raid for just two hours.

'What to do? If I play around for 2 hours for every 6 hours, I'll be doing nothing for 6 hours every day. The others will be staying up all night to hunt, so the gap will just grow larger...'

Having headed in with the guards for replanning, Ark blew out a sigh. 'And to think that Snake's inability to eat items would be this critical.'

Since he was fighting at Jackson Castle, he had thought he'd be able to keep selling his loot. But there was a variable that he hadn't even imagined. It was that all the NPC shops had closed shop when Jackson Castle was attacked. Necessities could be bought through the quartermaster inside the castle, but the sale of loot was impossible.

The event quest had just begun. However, Ark's bag was already 80% full.

Since there was no knowing what kind of item would drop and when, he was now unable to blindly grab items except for ones that stacked.

'To think that I've fallen into situation where I can't grab everything in front of my eyes...'

They were japtem worth a dozen coppers and a few silvers at best, but collecting small change eventually leads to quite a sum. Since he couldn't take money that was on the ground, he was likely to go crazy and tear his hair out.

That wasn't the only problem.

Hiss, hiss...

Having entered metamorphosis, Snake was gradually weakening and was spitting out an item from its belly at regular intervals. Since all the items Snake had been storing were useful, depending on the item, there were times when he left items that he'd obtained or picked them up. Ark really felt like his skin was being peeled away with each item he had to leave behind.

'I can't blame Snake since it ate the Fruit of Basium by my mistake...'

Seeing Snake throw up yet another item with a grueling expression, Ark could only sigh. Now that he knew that Snake was throwing up items at regular intervals, he

could no longer unsummon it. If Snake vomitted all the precious items in the Netherworld, there'd be no way to retrieve them.

At the very least, Snake was able to regain its strength a little when Ark occasionally used Nursing, which fortunately decreased the vomiting. Of course, Ark had mulled over many ways to end Snake's process of metamorphosis. However, there was nothing in particular that came to mind.

Thinking he might know, Ark asked the Alchemist Raymond, who was rich in knowledge concerning magic ingredients. However, Raymond shook his head.

"Even I have heard of the Fruit of Basium. However, the Fruit of Basium is processed in a special manner to make magic medicine or is used as a catalyst. I've never heard of a living creature that has eaten it directly, so it's hard to say. I'm sorry I'm not of much help."

"It's alright."

He was aware that this was not something that could be solved so easily. With a sour face, Ark shook his head and turned around.

Then, Raymond asked cautiously, "Ark, can I talk to you for a moment?"

"What's the matter?"

"Actually... having heard that you were here, there's a fellow who says he absolutely must see you."

Embarrassed, Raymond gestured towards a boy lingering around the doorway. It was a familiar face. As Ark looked towards him, Raymond explained, "This is my rascal you saved, my son. Which reminds me, I haven't even introduced him to you. This is Tom."

"Ah!" Only then did Ark remember the boy.

This was Raymond's child, who had been lying on his sickbed. His face back then had been haggard, but now he looked completely healthy. Of course he did, since nearly half a year had passed for an NPC.

Tom's eyes sparkled as he looked at Ark and said, "You're Ark, right? Father has told me so much about you. That I would have died if not for you, and that I must never forget your name. Of course I will never forget you. Ark, you are my life's savior."

A fresh smile spread on the tired Ark's lips. Although he knew it was an NPC programmed response, it was still heart-warming to see that the boy had become healthy thanks to his actions.

Actually, Ark hadn't been able to understand when there were occasional news reports of moving stories about someone donating anonymously or devoting their entire lives to others. For what reason would one give away the money they worked to the bone for? But seeing the tears in Tom's eyes, he thought he could understand their feelings. Granted, he only felt that way since this was a game; in real life, there was no way.

"I'm not such a great person. Rather, your father is more admirable."

Tom rubbed the tip of his nose and answered with a proud face, "Hehehe, I know that. But you are as great a person as my father."

Then Dedric whispered from Ark's shoulder, "He still doesn't know Master's real character, poor guy. It's better if he doesn't find out."

While Ark was giving Dedric a dirty look, Tom said, "But Ark, you help injured people, right?"

"I want to help them, if possible."

"Then, do you think you could also help my friend and his dad?"

"This fella, what are you saying? Ark here has only just returned from fighting monsters to protect Jackson Castle. Don't you think we should let him rest?"

"But..." Tom lowered his head with a sullen expression.

"Raymond, what's this?"

"No, actually... After Jackson Castle was covered by the Dark Fog, many residents have been suffering from an inexplicable disease. And since refugees from the entirety of the territory have gathered here, they aren't able to receive satisfactory treatment. We've asked for help from a few of the volunteer troops, but they say they don't have the time to spare... No, since they have come to protect Jackson Castle, we can't complain."

Since the Clerics were the core power of the attack raid, of course it would've been hard to lend their time.

Ark contemplated for a moment, nodded his head and said, "Please lead on. I probably won't be much help, but I cannot let it pass."

"But didn't you just return from battle?"

Ark replied without hesitation. "I am trained, so it's fine even if I don't sleep for a few days or so."

In any case, it was hard to go hunting alone for 3 hours. Therefore, he had determined that it would be better to increase his intimacy with the residents instead.

"I told you so! I said Ark would help, didn't I?"

"Haah, it has become an inconvenience to you because this little guy said something unnecessary."

Raymond led Ark to the temporary refugee shelter with an apologetic look.

As he'd heard, the shelter was filled with people who were obviously ill. The families could only watch their suffering parents or children with anguished eyes.

He was used to such a scene by now, but his heart still felt bitter. He knew that this was just a virtual reality. But it was like watching a sad story and tearing up even though it was just a fictional movie. That effect was even greater in New World, where everything felt more real than it did in a movie.

"Papa, papa... Please wake up, waaah!"

"Cough, cough, Mom. My head hurts."

"My child, be strong. You'll get better."

"Ohh, how could such a good child... God, please let this child live..."

A child trying to wake her parent up by shaking him. A parent holding her pale child and praying.

He had a lump in his throat. It was as if he was watching his past self.

How much did he cry while holding the hand of his mother, who could not wake from her sickbed? How much did he pray? How afraid and fearful was he at the thought that perhaps he would lose his mother?

If he closed his eyes even now, Ark could recite from memory the Bible verses that he had read over and over again in the dark hospital room. He did everything he

could to clutch at straws. He wished and wished that God would appear and tell him to sacrifice his own life instead.

That desperation... these people felt the same way as he had. Awash in recollection, Ark's eyes had become moist at some point.

'They're not just NPCs. They are people.' Ark clenched his teeth.

To be truthful, at first, he didn't want to acknowledge that he felt sympathy for NPCs.

Crying because of a game? He thought it was something only a one or two year old child would do. But as he travelled around New World and met countless NPCs, Ark abandoned those thoughts.

If the definition of life was to be able to think for themselves, then NPCs were living creatures too. Though they were man made Als, if they had consciences, then they were already no different from living beings.

What was the shame in sympathizing with them?

The ones who should be truly ashamed were people who showed their insensitivity by giggling while watching a sad movie. We must accept things that are sad as sad. Isn't that what makes humans human?

"Grandpa... Uwahh."

"Kid. Move aside for a moment."

Ark sat next to the whimpering child and held the trembling old man's hand.

"Please shed your fear and be strong. Before you are patient, you are the grandpa of this kid and an excellent friend to your neighbors. Though of course it is difficult for you, you are not the only one who is suffering from your pain. Your grandson, who is crying here, your friend who is moaning next you, and is enduring as much pain as you as they worry. Please keep that in mind. Lean on them as much as you want and borrow their strength to fight the pain. This is just an ordeal, not a fate that cannot be overcome. The tears of your grandchild and the sincerity of your friend's worries will be your weapon."

This was what he had wanted to say to his mother long ago while she lay in her hospital bed.

At those words, the Nursing skill was activated and a bright light emanated out. Then, as the light grew stronger, the dark energy that had been filling the shelter began to weaken.

Afterwards, there was a dramatic change. Faces of deathly ill patients lit up. Their breathing became comfortable, and the sound of coughing from the shelter stopped.

Miracle Nursing has succeeded.

You can sincerely understand the heart and minds of the sick in further.

What patients want is not medicine to immediately wash away their pain. What they want is a warm hand that can understand their pain and cleanse their wounds with a sincere heart. Everyone, especially the refugees, were feeling a sense of alienation that was more hurtful than their illness. Now, your sincere words to them will be a treatment more excellent than medicine.

As long as the Dark Fog remains, the refugees will not fully recover. But your sincere words gave them the courage to fight the illness. The refugees will briefly forget their pain and will endure until the Dark Fog is gone.

\* By succeeding Miracle Nursing, all stats have increased by 1.

\* Affection has increased by 10.

\* Fame has increased by 50.

\* Alignment to Good has increased by 50.

\* You have acquired the title 'Caretaker of All' from succeeding Miracle Nursing. Fame as a Caretaker has increased, so you will receive praises from many patients.

\* As a title bonus, all stats increase by 1.

\* Fame increases by 50.

He received 2,000 additional contribution points. Though it didn't have any influence on the battle, they were contribution points he received for saving residents. But the greater reward was the smiles that returned to the patients' faces.

'What a relief...'

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

"I told you so! I told you that Ark would be able to help!" Tom had tears spilling from his eyes as he proudly yelled out.

It was then— he suddenly heard a crashing noise from the entrance as a perplexed voice cried out.

“Ark? Did you say Ark?”

When he turned around, he saw a girl wearing a white robe staring blankly at Ark. When Ark made a strange expression, Tom pointed at her and explained, “Oh, she works and helps out here. Her name is Roco...”

“That reminds me, you did say that you started the game, too, didn’t you? It’s been crazy lately, so I forgot about it.”

“Hehe, I’m already level 25.” Jung Hye-sun, aka Roco, declared proudly.

She had recently arrived in Jackson Castle from Harun Village. Then, only when she reached Jackson did she first learn about job-changing. The profession she selected was Minstrel, a profession that could use both slight recovery and support skills.

“Of all the...” Ark clicked his tongue.

Though he had met many users, he’d never seen a Minstrel. Although Minstrels had recovery and support abilities, they were less efficient than Cleric-related professions. In addition, Clerics were equipped with their own fighting ability, and were able to solo without much difficulty as a result. However, the fighting ability of Minstrels was as low as Merchants.

A Minstrel’s strong point over a Cleric was that since it used music, most of its skills had a wide area effect. However, not being able to solo easily was a big penalty, so it was a profession looked down on by players. Therefore, there were many cases of people who mistakenly job-changed, canceled extremely early on, and chose a different profession. Cancelling a profession was only available to starter professions, and you had to pay a fine of 200 gold to the profession NPC. Meaning, it was a profession that people wanted to cancel even while having to pay such a large fine.

But Roco shook her head. “I like this profession. I’ve always had a lot of interest in music, you see. I can try instruments that I never even had the chance to touch because they were expensive, like the harp, piano, and flute, to my heart’s content. Also, with a little effort, I can quickly learn to play here. And...”

She had not started New World to play solo. Since it was a game that she had started to play with the desire to meet Ark and be helpful to him, she had chosen Minstrel without hesitation. However, she could not say that in front of Ark, who was the same as Hyun-woo in reality.

"I didn't know you were interested in music."

"Because we've never gone to karaoke together."

"Well yeah. Still, it's a relief that you found a job you like."

"Yes, it was a good idea to start New World."

As Roco let escape a muffled laugh, Dedric stared at her suspiciously and butted in, "Who's this, Master? Your girlfriend? Is that how it is?"

"Wanna die?"

When Ark threatened, Roco asked with shining eyes, "Oho? That bat, it wasn't just an decoration? Does it also speak?"

"I am not a bat. I am a noble of the Underworld, Dedric!"

"Kyaaaa, it said it's a *noble*. How adorable!"

Dedric was puffing his chest with pride when Roco suddenly grabbed and shook him. She also discovered Skull, who was rolling next to her and picked it up.

She was not the same Roco who had screamed at the mere sight of mice. The life-like virtual reality game had completely changed her.

"Aish, you won't let go? How dare you..."

Unable to endure Roco's grabbing and shaking, Dedric transformed into a person and expressed his irritation. But that simply added oil to Roco's interest. When he turned into a cute boy, Roco hugged him while giggling.

"Omo, so you can also transform. Seeing your wild eyes is like looking at my little brother when he was young. Hohoho, it must be nice, Ark. You get to carry things like this around, too."

"What? *Th-things like this?*"

"Uwah, so cute. Hey, how old are you?"

"...Three hundred years old."

"Hohoho, even the way you answer is cute. Come here and big sister will give you some wheat bread."

"Wanna die?"

"Come on, don't be like that and play with big sister. Skull, you come here as well."

"Ma-Master, do something about this chick!"

As Roco nuzzled her cheek on him, Dedric asked for help with a pale face. However, since Ark had been displeased with Dedric's arrogant attitude these days, he completely ignored Dedric and asked Roco, "But you're still managing pretty well. It isn't easy to endure in this place..."

"Oh, that's right!" Roco clapped, as if remembering something just then. "Come to think of it, there's someone I have to introduce to you, oppa."

"Introduce?"

"Yes, he's the one who's been helping me since Harun Village. He's out on a small errand, but he'll be back soon. I'm sure you will be happy to see him, too."

Roco grabbed Ark's hand and pulled him along.

Since the start of the event quest, it had become impossible for players in Jackson Territory to log out. Therefore, unless they died, they couldn't escape until the event quest ended. So even if a player left the unit, the character was left in the game in a sleeping state. The person Roco introduced to him had also not returned to his unit and was still sleeping against the wall of a building.

"Do you not recognize him?"

"Well... there's no one I know in New World..." Ark examined the character with an indifferent eye.

He was a big-bodied male character. His armorless body was bulging with muscles. As for weapons and such, he was wearing martial arts gloves like what you might see in MMA games, and his wrists, elbows, and shoulders were wrapped in leather bands.

Overall, the atmosphere around him was like an American pro-wrestler.

'He knows me? But I've never seen a person like him in New World?'

"Eh? EEHHH?" While staring at the man's face, a bizarre scream burst from Ark's mouth. The square angular face, the bushy beard. It was indeed a face he knew from memory. And it wasn't from the game, but reality!

Just then, the character vibrated and lifted his head. He looked at Ark and Rocco with a vacant stare, roughly sized up the situation, grinned and stood up.

“Isn’t it Hyun-woo! It’s really nice to meet you in the game. How have you been?”

“De-Detective Gwon?”

“Why are you so surprised? You were the one who told me to try out the game. I gave it a go and I’m quite pleased with it. So I’ve been so busy playing that I haven’t even slept for a few days. Well, I still go to the hospital. I’m used to staying up all night from my detective days. Ack, my shoulders hurt.”

Gwon Hwa-rang. No, JusticeMan mumbled while rotating his arm.

Surprisingly, JusticeMan was already level 40.

“Ah, it has really been an eventful month.” JusticeMan mumbled while absentmindedly looking at the distant mountains.

\* \* \*

In fact, Gwon Hwa-rang hadn’t leveled up very quickly after first starting the game.

Since he had ignorantly beaten Wolves to death from the beginning, of course he received a lot of EXP. But while helping others, he was never able to get 100% of the EXP and sometimes he even died, so leveling up became slower and slower.

Moreover, even though Gwon Hwa-rang was as strong as he was ignorant, he was actually a newb at games.

Of course, since he had brute skills, dealing with Wild Dogs and Wolves posed no problem. However, once he somehow reached level 20, Wild Dogs and Wolves no longer gave much experience. So he went out a little further, and problems that he couldn’t make head or tail of occurred.

A beginner village was literally a beginner village. It is an area where people without knowledge of the game can live in, somehow or another. But once he left the beginner village, his situation changed completely.

What bothered Gwon Hwa-rang in particular were the monsters that applied abnormal conditions. Because it was still a low-level area, there were no monsters that applied powerful abnormal conditions, but Gwon Hwa-rang had no idea what to do and just struggled even when he received ‘Bleed’ or ‘Weaken’.

Abnormal condition resistance was influenced by Agility, Intelligence, and Luck. However, without any knowledge of stat distribution, he blindly poured his stat points into only Strength and Stamina. His resistance against conditions was rock bottom, so when he took a blow, he almost certainly received a status condition.

A normal player would have come up with countermeasures by that point. But Gwon Hwa-rang was nothing if not fighting spirit– the harder the situation, the more his motivation burned, so he began to die like crazy. As a result, his stats were being cut down and he was even dropping his shabby equipment, so of course fighting became harder.

Was that all? Though he was over forty years old, he had no concept of money management. Thus, he didn't even have the money to repair his equipment, so they broke, and there were even times when he couldn't buy himself wheat bread to eat. Granted, the players who received his help occasionally took care of him, but New World wasn't so easy a place that one could live on just that.

"Damn it, why is this game so complicated?"

Beaten to death by monsters that looked unbelievably weak *yet again*, Gwon Hwa-rang scratched his head while smoking a pack of cigarettes. With the situation this severe, he was forced to acknowledge that he couldn't properly raise his character by just blindly rushing in and fighting.

Gwon Hwa-rang put out his cigarette and glanced at the manual for New World that had come when he bought the unit. Though he had thought about reading it, he quickly shook his head. He couldn't even remember the last time he had read a book. Especially not a gaming manual filled with game terms that were strange to pronounce. Looking at the fearsomely thick manual, he couldn't even draw the nerve to pick it up.

"This is driving me crazy. Just when the game was getting good. What is this? Still, I can't just cling to the busy Hyun-woo and ask for help..."

Then, something flashed into Gwon Hwa-rang's mind. "Wait a minute, to think of it, aren't there quite a few game fanatics? If I drag them in..."

Gwon Hwa-rang got up immediately and made some calls here and there.

A short while afterwards, 10 men were gathered in his house. They were men with colorful pasts as fairly infamous pickpockets, smugglers, fraudsters, violent offenders, etc.. Gwon Hwa-rang, who had become a probation officer, managed these so-called good-for-nothings with criminal records.

Gwon Hwa-rang summoned them and grinned as he asked, "Alright, anyone here who is confident in playing games, put your hands up."

All 10 people raised their hands.

"Okay, then there'll be no problem. From now on, you will all be my coaches."

"Huh? Your coach?"

"Yes, from now on, all of you will take turns coming over to my house to coach me."

"What game are you playing?"

"New World."

"But we haven't had the chance to play New World yet..."

The ex-convicts scratched their heads with unconfident expressions.

But after hearing Gwon Hwa-rang's questions, the looks on their faces turned to utter amazement. Gwon Hwa-rang was a person without any MMORPG, no, any gaming basic knowledge at all.

If you fight, your level will rise, If you level up, you become stronger. Then you have to fight stronger enemies. That was all Gwon Hwa-Rang knew about New World.

"What are active skills, you ask? Do you seriously call that a question?"

"You *still* don't know what potions do?"

"Why exactly do you go around with your armor *off*?"

"You took it off because it was annoying? Then why in the world do you think people are uneasy when they aren't wearing heavy plate armor?"

"Why do you keep blindly rushing in and dying? Huh? Know no retreat? Are you kidding me?"

"How in hell did you even manage to level up to 20?"

"Ah, dammit. I can't take this anymore, it's too frustrating. Hey you, order units!"

In the end, with the good-for-nothings tearing their hair out with frustration, they brought in units and ended up playing the game together. Following the former detective, the ten ex-convicts came to walk the paths of gamers.

Their character names were number 1401 to 1410, their probation numbers.

With the help of these game-knowledgeable fellows, Gwon Hwa-rang began to learn the basics of New World. But he was still a passionate detective. Gwon Hwa-rang's basic playing style didn't change.

"Over there! Someone's asking for help over there! Let's go!"

"EHH? *Again?* Just what do we gain for deliberately going over to help?"

"Regardless of how this started, this is one of your social adjustment programs. Rather than putting in time later you will practice justice here and learn how satisfying it is, understood?"

"It's okay if we don't learn that."

"Quiet! You want to get hit and go or just go?"

Gwon Hwa-rang bullied them and dragged them around. The sight of them was the talk of the players in Harun Village.

"Look at that, Machoman's crew grew!"

Just like that, the party made up of a detective and ex-convicts became a new hot topic in the beginner village. This was how Gwon Hwa-rang, who had no knowledge whatsoever about games, was able to reach level 40 in a month.

Well, with 10 users backing you up, you can't help but level up quickly.

\* \* \*

JusticeMan and Roco met in Harun Village. After JusticeMan rescued Roco a few times, they started go around together whenever they logged in. That was why Roco was able to reach level 25 without any combat ability.

Then, they naturally came to know that they both knew Ark, and with that connection, they ended up going all the way to Jackson Castle together. Not long after they arrived, the event quest started and they unknowingly joined the militia.

"Then what did you job-change to?"

"I haven't chosen a profession yet. I looked around but I haven't found one that fits me yet."

"You still haven't chosen a job at level 40?"

“Not having a job doesn’t seem to matter? Plus, with the castle in such disorder right now, I can’t even if I wanted to.” JusticeMan answered with a disinterested expression.

Ark briefly stared at JusticeMan and Roco. He wanted to be of some help to JusticeMan and Roco, who were still newbs to the ways of New World. Also, one was like a savior to him and the other was one that he thought of as a little sister.

They were truly people he sincerely wanted to help.

Even though the ex-convicts were with them, their levels were still below 20. Moreover, since the start of the event quest, 8 had died, leaving only #1401 and #1405. There were only 2 of them left.

‘Wherever I go with JusticeMan and Roco, we’d probably be treated coldly... if so...’

After pondering for a moment Ark decided to drag them into the Guard. It wouldn’t be easy, but he didn’t think it would be impossible if he use the intimacy he’d raised with the Guard and his relationship with the Lord.

“Mister, do you want to raise contribution points with Roco and me? Since this is an event quest, if you raise your contribution by participating in the militia, you’ll be able to receive a pretty good reward.”

“Sounds good to me. What the militia is doing is boring. Roco also started this game to play with you, so that’s not a problem, but I’m not sure it’ll be alright since we’ve got so many other members.”

JusticeMan mumbled while scratching his head.

“Other members? #1401 and #1405?”

“No, actually, JusticeMan mister is the current militia leader. The people he helped in Harun Village recommended him. In the beginning there were about 200 people who received the militia quest, but almost all of them died on the first day. There are only about 20 people who survived out of the 50 who followed JusticeMan.”

“Fifty?” responded Ark with a surprised expression. It was fascinating that so many users were following JusticeMan, who had only been playing for 20 days. Of course, JusticeMan had a charm that somehow drew people towards him. But that was in the real world. Just how in the world did a gaming newb gather so many people? Having never seen JusticeMan’s unusual gameplay, Ark had a hard time imagining it.

‘Anyways, 20 militia... it might be tough, but I might as well try asking.’

He didn’t like interacting with other players, but these were people who followed JusticeMan. If it was someone else, Ark would have refused them even if they had offered him a bag of money, but it was a different story for people related to JusticeMan and Roco.

Whether in reality or the game, they were the only two people Ark didn’t calculate profit or loss with. The fewer there are, the stronger the attachment.

\* \* \*

“You’re asking me to combine the militia with the Guard?” Having received Ark’s request, the Lord responded with a perplexed expression. “Well, it’s true there isn’t anything to assign the militia right now... but it pricks my conscience to send out the militia again when many have already sacrificed themselves. And truthfully, I don’t even know if they would be much help.”

“I will take responsibility for them. Also, they will definitely be helpful.”

“Hmm...”

As the young Lord pondered, Cross, whose intimacy with Ark was even higher, gave his support. “Ark must have a plan of his own, seeing how he asking like this. And even if they aren’t much of a help in battle, we can still entrust the rear of the Guard to them. The militia are also volunteer troops who rose up to protect Jackson, isn’t it wrong to push them to the back just because they are weak?”

“What you say has merit, alright. I’ll leave that matter to you. But keep this in mind. Resident or foreigner, their lives are equally precious. In addition, protecting them and reducing the sacrifices is our duty. If it seems dangerous, you must return them to the castle.”

“Of course.”

Like that, the 20 militiamen that no one even looked at were added to the Jackson Guard. The one most happy with the decision was the former detective, JusticeMan.

“Finally, we’ve gotten a job worth doing. I was about to get fed up with luggage moving quests.”

“Please don’t push yourself too much. Even if you just participate a little, your contribution will increase.” Ark worriedly entreated the extremely motivated JusticeMan.

But JusticeMan just snorted. "I can't do that. Even if I die, dying in flames is how a police officer of South Korea must go."

After a while, Ark realized that his fears were baseless. 'Wh-what is that?'

Ark's prediction that JusticeMan and the militia with their low levels wouldn't be helpful was overturned. Though they couldn't fight many monsters at once like the Guard could, the skill with which they systematically pressured monsters while perfectly in sync was incomparable to the Guards.

The 20 users lured monsters, surrounded them, and completely annihilated them all in one beat.

JusticeMan, who had started way later than Ark, even figured out the skills of various jobs and used them effectively in combos. Thanks to that, even users with an average level of 35 were able to hunt level 85 monsters. The fact that they had survived in battle until the volunteer troops had arrived was not all luck.

'Come to think of it...'

It was then that Ark remembered that JusticeMan was no ordinary government official. He was a person who had been dispatched to South America in a special squad as a police instructor.

To put it in words, in group battle, he was a professional!

Was that all? Ark was too focused on the game and forgot one obvious fact. No, most users probably forgot this fact.

It was the fact that 80% of healthy males in Korea received professional military training! 80% receiving military training was not common worldwide.

The potential of that was unimaginable.

People usually said that one would rot if they went into the military, but they said that because they didn't know the potential of military training. There was even an incident like this in Japan long ago. Korean international students in Japan resented the rash violence of the local yakuza and declared an all-out war. However, their opponents were specialized killers who didn't hesitate to murder. When the international students came at them, of course the yakuza snorted at them.

And as expected, at first the international students were pushed back. What changed the situation was when command was entrusted to an international student who was a commissioned officer. Once the chain of command was established, the

situation changed completely. Pushed to near annihilation by a military operation counterattacks, it ended with the yakuza kneeling and begging for forgiveness.

The scene in front of Ark's eyes was not very different from that incident. Though they were only level 35 and couldn't demonstrate much strength by themselves, if they carried out tactics under a proper commander, the users who had completed basic military training showed amazing teamwork and unity.

The teamwork of gamers from the Republic of Korea who had dominated the online gaming world in the 90s came from their military training.

'So you can play the game like this!'

Ark, who had been about to teach JusticeMan, ended up learning from him instead. But there was someone who received a greater shock from JusticeMan's tactics.

"Ohh, the strategy of these foreigners isn't bad. Who in the world is that guy leading the militia?"

It was the commander of the Guard, Cross.

JusticeMan had unwillingly ended up leading the militia. But once he was entrusted with a mission, he would get it done even if the sky fell down. Since he was always leading the militia while making strategies, he had gained a totally unexpected skill, 'Tactics'. Cross was reacting to that skill.

"Without a doubt, that guy was a general in some foreign land. My God, to think we kept such an outstanding man like him locked up inside the fort... I see, so that's why you wanted the militia to join the Guard."

"Yes, well... that's about right." Ark smiled with a strange expression and equivocated.

"Thanks to you, I have finally opened my eyes. I have realized what true tactics are!"

Cross ran over to JusticeMan with a cheer. And then he began to ask JusticeMan to teach him about tactics from the very beginning. JusticeMan, who lived for the fun of helping others, gladly agreed.

"Okay, but my training is really hard!"

"I am resolved!"

JusticeMan gained command of the Guard in an instant. Thanks to that, the soldiers had to fight monsters while receiving his special task force training.

"I am nothing without the group. There is only US!"

"Actual battle soon turns to training. No matter how pressing the situation is, don't break formation!"

"Lax! Hey, you! Fall back and give me 100 push ups!"

The NPC getting dragged out while in the heat of battle to receive punishment wasn't even a funny situation.

"Hey you there, can't you do it right?"

Of course, the people doling out the punishments were the skillful TAs, #1401 and #1405. In any case, the Guard's lack of organizing skills were strengthened by JusticeMan. Naturally, their monster hunting speed also increased.

Roco was also above ordinary. Although Roco chose the Minstrel profession that was shunned by all, she demonstrated an enormously active role in group battle, despite being only level 25. As soon as it got dangerous, the sound of the harp and Roco's singing could be heard.

"The fragrance carried on the wind is coming to wipe away the fatigue of the day and drive away the darkness."

– Song of Vitality has applied. For the next 5 minutes, fatigue decreases and night-vision is given. Affects all the people who have heard the song.
--

The support skills of the minstrel affected a large radius. Additionally, most of them had long lasting effects.

'Fight Song' increased the morale and courage of allied forces, while 'Song of Despair' decreased the morale and courage of the enemy. Also, if she sang 'Song of Recovery,' 200 Health was recovered over 3 minutes. Although it wasn't much compared with a Cleric's recovery magic, it had a wide range! Moreover, it was a skill with hardly any Mana consumption.

But the highlight was 'Song of Vitality,' which reduced fatigue! Thanks to it, the Guard didn't feel fatigued and had more time to receive JusticeMan's rough training.

'NPCs are working together with players, this is awesome!'

Ark hadn't even been able to imagine such an additional effect.

The low-leveled militia leveled up like crazy. Of course, Ark accumulated considerable experience and contribution points.

“Quest-related information window!”

– Ark’s current contribution is 9,400. You are in 68th place.

When Ark joined the Guard, his rank was 127. Since there were about 160 users in Jackson Castle including the 20 militia who were participating in the quest, he was in the mid-upper range.

‘But there is still a long way to catch up to Alan.’

The top 10 contributors were updated every 8 hours on the plaza’s bulletin board. The current top 10 players were all in Platoon 1, which was led by Alan. And Alan’s contribution points were a whopping 30,600, putting him in an overwhelming first place.

He was using his position to eat up the contribution points of Platoons 2 and 3, but no one voiced their complaints because he was the commander of the strongest platoon.

Alan was recognized as number 1 by not only the NPCs, but also the players.

‘I can really overtake Alan?’

Everything was going better than Ark expected. However, the wall of the Holy Knight Alan, who was still backed up by the players, was as high as ever.

Moreover, unlike the other volunteer troops, Ark and the militia couldn’t continue battle without the Guard. Naturally, it wasn’t easy to catch up to the volunteer troops who went seeking battle without rest.

‘Should I be satisfied with this level?’

## **Act 4 : Holy Knight Alan**

“Phew, I’m tired.”

Hyun-woo dragged his tired body back home. With the start of the event quest, he had stayed up for two days. Other players were able to leave their characters, and occasionally rest when the monsters’ attacks slowed down, but Hyun-woo couldn’t afford such luxury.

Even when there wasn't any fighting, he had care for the sick patients in the shelter. Although they had regained their vitality with the success of his miraculous treatment, the disease hadn't been fully cured. For Hyun-woo, who regretted missing out on even 1 contribution point, it was actually rather fortunate.

However, no matter how busy he was with the quest, he couldn't forget to stop by the hospital once every two days. If he neglected his mother because of a game, then wouldn't that be putting the cart before the horse?

'Still, it's a relief mother has gotten so much better.' A smile spread on Hyun-woo's lips.

After starting rehabilitation treatment, his mother's complexion had been improving day by day.

Even though he, himself, had heavy, dark circles under his eyes, Hyun-woo was still as worried as ever. However, because there was the option Gwon Hwa-rang had roughly suggested, his anxiety wasn't as sharp as before. In any case, there was no better cure for Hyun Woo's intense fatigue than the news of his mother's health improvement.

'Should I sleep for a couple of hours before I log in?' If I don't sleep now, I won't be able to sleep for the whole day...'

It had already been two days since the start of the event quest. There was only one day remaining now. Hyun-woo forcefully lifted his eyelids, which were slowly drooping on their own, as he turned the TV on out of habit. He didn't know when such a habit had formed, but he couldn't fall asleep well if his surroundings weren't noisy. As a result, setting a timer on the TV and falling asleep had hardened into a habit.

A game coverage broadcast happened to be starting on TV. It was a program that usually handled general games, but recently, two thirds of the reports were about New World, which was being broadcasted as a social topic. Moreover, since the start of the event quest, it had turned into a New World feature program altogether.

A pretty reporter was giving a lengthy report regarding New World on the TV screen.

"I shall now take you to find out about this event quest. Mr. Ha Myung-woo, have you been well?"

"Yes, it's nice to see you."

When a familiar face appeared on TV, Hyun-woo turned up the volume slightly.

“As I said mentioned before, the viewers are curious about many matters regarding this event quest. First, it’s said that there was no announcement before this quest started, and, because of it, I’ve heard there’s been a flood of complaints from players who could not participate. What do you think about this issue, Sir?”

“We are listening attentively, since they are words coming from those who value New World so much. However, New World is a perfect virtual reality world. If an operating interferes with such a world to announce future incidents in advance, or if information is leaked, it will cause a severe problem in the game’s overall balance. Therefore, Global Exos is adhering to an onlooker position regarding game progress.”

“Then, do you mean to say the next event will also occur without any prior notice?”

“As it has not yet been discussed in detail, I cannot say. What I *can* say is that New World is a world exclusively made for the players. The start of the event was not intended by the developers, but by each and every user’s course of actions and decisions, naturally influencing the progression.”

“How surprising. Then, ultimately, it means that New World is no different from reality, right?”

“That is exactly the game ideal we seek.” Ha Myung-woo laughed, as if pleased with the reporter’s words.

“Then let’s change the topic. There was recently the subject of the epic item sold for 70 million Won (~\$70,000) on the auction site specializing in selling New World items. What are your thoughts on such an event?”

‘70 million Won?’ Hyun-woo felt choked. It had only been three months since the opening of New World. Ultimately, players were, at best, were under level 100, but 70 million won... Then, didn’t it mean items of such value could easily appear in the future?

However, on TV, Ha Myung-woo did not show a very surprised reaction. “Well, it has already been 20 years since item trading was made legal. Since then, countless items have been traded, and more than a few of the expensive ones exceeded the millions in price. Though it hasn’t been long since we opened, I think it is natural for an item with such a price to appear. In addition, I believe an item of unprecedented price will appear in New World soon.”

"Wow, I'm already trembling in anticipation! I'm starting to understand the words of the many game tycoons who were chatting on the internet. Then, please continue to make a good game for us."

"Yes, we will try."

Ha Myung-woo bowed as the TV visual changed.

'Game tycoons...'

That was the term coined for the people who struck it rich by selling a game item. Of course, becoming one would require investing countless hours and luck, but it was a fantasy dreamt by every gamer who played for a living as they logged in.

Hyun-woo was surely not an exception. Even if it wasn't to the extent of being a tycoon, he thought there would be nothing more to desire if he could just live without worrying about his monthly bills.

'But that too will only be possible if my stamina keeps up.'

Hyun-woo closed his eyes as he yawned wide. However, his eyes snapped open like a surprised rabbit at the next sounds from the TV.

"Unfortunately, due to the secrecy of the developers, we are still unable to acquire videos related to the event quest. Apparently, players participating in the quest who have captured screen footage, were unable to send us their videos because they cannot logout. However, we were able to meet, with difficulty, the famous player who, according to the reports of several players, currently stands at 1st place in quest contribution points. Did you say your ID was Alan?"

'Alan!'

Hyun-woo shot to his feet and locked his gaze on the TV screen.

"Yes, I am Alan."

The person who replied to the reporter's question was a young man in his early 20s. With a handsome face and wearing clothes that looked expensive at first glance, even his figure was model-class. Seeing his easy composure despite being on camera, it seemed like he was a successful celebrity.

'So this man is Alan...' A sigh flowed out on its own.

There were many cases where players with good-looking characters in the game were actually dull in appearance. But for Alan, it was the opposite. The Holy Knight

Alan was a considerable pretty boy, but seeing the real Alan was enough to make you think the in-game character had actually been a little messed up.

At the sight of Alan smiling from within the TV at him, Ark felt a baseless sense of defeat.

Rich, handsome, and he likely had a good academic background, since he was enough to be recruited into Global Exos. There was nothing he lacked. He was not someone who could even be compared to Hyun-woo, who lacked so very, very much. Thinking of the Kang Mi-su, whom he had liked quite a lot, he inadvertently blew out a sigh. Honestly, if Hyun-woo was a girl, his heart would lean towards Alan rather than himself. It appeared the reporter thought so as well.

"I didn't expect you to be so handsome. If you say you like games, no wonder I get a dark feeling..."

*[T/N: The reporter is wryly suggesting that considering his looks, Alan could be a playa. Of girls as well as games.]*

"That too is a story from the past."

"Oh ho, is that saying you believe you're good-lookin'?"

"Surely not. However, I think it is a bias to say I am 'dark' for playing games."

"Yes, looking at Alan-nim, I do think that way. But often, famous individuals are usually reluctant to show their faces in-game. What are your thoughts on that, Alan-nim?"

"It would also differ depending on one's individual personalities. The Holy Knight Alan I am raising is always a dignified character. I have never done anything bad in the game, and I've never sowed anyone's hatred. There's really no reason to hide."

"Wow, so cool. Then you're saying you've gotten 1st place in this quest fair and square."

"Of course. However, I am not first because of my own successes. In reality or in-game, there's no one who succeeds alone. I have many friends, and I simply became first some way or another through their help. So first, I have to give them my thanks."

"You even speak well. Even I would want to help you."

"Thank y—"

Hyun-woo turned off the TV.

No one can succeed alone. Hearing those words made Hyun-woo feel as if everything he had done in New World was being denied. Even if those words were true, he didn't want to hear any more. Hyun-woo threw off his blanket and entered the unit.

'I can't win in anything against Alan in reality. So I cannot, and will not lose to him in the game. Wait and see, Alan, I will surpass you someday at all costs!'

He had long since forgotten his fatigue.

\* \* \*

– A sudden assault by an assassination skill has dealt you a critical hit. 300 X 3 damage taken.

As soon as Ark connected to the game, he was greeted by a red warning message. Nearly 60% of his Health was lost in an instant.

In order to avoid paying a lodging bill, Ark logged out in a fairly deserted alley. However, he was dumbfounded since it was still a street in the castle, yet he had suddenly taken damage as soon as he connected.

'Huh? Did something happen in Jackson while I was gone?'

Then, someone suddenly appeared before his eyes.

It was not a monster. The character wearing jet-black leather armor and even a bandana over the face was definitely a user. Ark hastily withdrew and cast Eyes of the Cat. However, he couldn't check the user's information.

By using Eyes of the Cat, the basic information, name, profession, and Health of the opponent was shown. Of course, this was not applicable to all players. Only Health was displayed for enemies who were more than 10 levels higher. However, his information window just looked blurred with noise altogether.

He was definitely using a special skill or scroll to hide his identity. And if he was deliberately concealing his identity and attacking, he certainly had no good intentions.

"Who are you?"

"Hmph, so *now* you answer, I thought you might be asleep in the unit since there was no answer when I called you. That greeting was just a substitute for an alarm clock, so don't be too touchy."

A somewhat androgynous voice came out from the space in the bandana.

"What? You call that a greeting?"

"Whatever. I don't want to argue with you."

When Ark expressed his anger, he flicked his hand as if it was troublesome.

"I'll keep it short. Hand over the item called Black Frost Blade. Then, I'll leave quietly."

"Black Frost Blade?" Ark knit his brows as he asked.

The Black Frost Blade was the last item he won in the blind auction. Ark had bought it because he had the feeling there was something more to it, but he had just been storing it since its purpose was unclear. But how did he even know the name of the item?

"Stop pretending you don't know. I know you bought it at the auction."

"... You attacked me to steal it?"

"I told you, right? Earlier was just a greeting, and well, I might have killed you if you hadn't answered even then... To be honest, I'm not a very patient person. I had to chase you all the way here even after receiving a timed quest because you snatched the item. I still have one day. Do you know how much I struggled to find you because you hid in a frickin' weird place after reaching Jackson?"

"That's your problem."

"You're saying some pretty words."

"Cause my actions are pretty?"

"Enough. Let's get back to the point. Hand over the item. I'll tell you in advance, it's better not to make up excuses. I'm sure you don't want this precious event quest to end with your death."

It was obviously a threat.

Ark glared at him with a slightly tense look.

He definitely didn't seem like an easy opponent. Ark's current level was about 70. With the darkness attribute bonus, he reached 90. Even if Ark was in 'Stealth' and succeeded in backstabbing a level 90 player, he couldn't deal 900 damage. Even if he

didn't know what kind of Assassin skill it was, it didn't seem like there was room for doubt the stats and level of this opponent were higher than Ark's. Besides, based on the equipment he was wearing and his use of 'Stealth,' it was likely his character was also of the dark attribute, like Ark. He wasn't someone Ark could win against with 60% of his health down from a pre-emptive strike.

'The quest will fail if I die. 24 hours of being unable to login!'

Dying would mean that two days of staying up for this quest would fly away in an instant. However, Ark wasn't one to just obediently hand over an item he had paid 220 Gold and 1 Copper approximately 2.2 million Won (~\$2,200) in cash. Even if he met a robber with a knife, 2.2 million Won was worth risking your life for in a fight. At the very least, Ark would do it.

"Hmph, you've got to be kidding. If you kill me in town, wouldn't you immediately come under a concentrated attack from the Soldiers?"

"That's not something I have to worry about."

The opponent spoke in a brazen tone. They weren't empty words; Ark felt confidence from him, as if he surely had some measures in place.

"And if I won't give it to you even if I die?"

"I can just take it from you after I kill you."

"I'd like to see you try."

"You're diggin' your own grave, idiot. If you really have a death-wish, I'll kill you. Target Ark, designated mark: Black Frost Blade," he shouted while tearing a red scroll he had pulled out.

It was the ever-so-familiar [Robbery] scroll, which designated an item in the opponent's pack and stole it after death. However, the eyes from behind the bandana were filled with confusion.

From his confused eyes, Ark was sure his own thoughts were right on the mark. After Ark found out about the existence of dangerous scrolls such as [Robbery], he had stashed away all valuables in Snake's stomach. He had calculated that if the scroll's scope was a backpack, then it wouldn't be able to search an NPC's stomach.

His prediction hit the mark.

Fortunately, Snake hadn't vomited the Black Frost Blade yet. A message saying there was no such item probably popped up in front of the guy's eyes.

Ark grinned as he slyly asked, "What's wrong? Did you see a disappointing message or something?"

"You... just what did you do with the item?"

"I wonder? Maybe I sold it off somewhere?"

"Do-don't make me laugh! There's no way you sold off an auction item you bought for 220 Gold. No, the store probably wouldn't even buy it. Of course, there's no way another person bought an item like it, cause other people have no need for it."

"So you even know how much I won it for. Did you come in with Giran's volunteer troops?" As Ark spoke with narrowed eyes, the guy flinched. "Well, whatever. In the end, your guess is right. I still have the item. But you'll never be able to steal it with the likes of the [Robbery] scroll. Are you still gonna kill me?"

He couldn't reply.

If he couldn't take the item he wanted, then there was no profit in killing Ark. He would just get marked as a Chaotic player and would get swarmed to death by the Soldiers. Now, Ark had the initiative.

He glared at Ark for a moment and said, "Fine. Then let's negotiate. I'll buy the item for 250 Gold. The item is related to my profession exclusive quest anyways. I don't know what you were expecting when you invested 220 gold on it, but it's useless to you. This isn't a lie."

"Don't wanna."

"What? I'm giving you 30 more Gold and you still say no?"

"Sure, maybe I would have agreed if you had come out with an offer from the beginning. I might've even sold it for 220 Gold."

Of course it was a lie. Ark wasn't such a pushover that he would hand it over in a sale to someone who was willing to take the risk of killing a player within a city for it. But since the situation had become like this, it was better for him to act generous.

"But you attacked me without warning and even tried to kill me. Now it's not about money, it's personal. Let me make it clear — I have no intention of selling it even if you offer 300 Gold."

"Do you really wanna die?"

"Go ahead if you want to," Ark quipped with a laugh.

This was a guy who had followed him all the way here for one item. He couldn't kill Ark while knowing he would forever lose the way to get the item if he killed Ark here and aggravated their relationship even further.

It was time he learned what Ark wanted. With an angry glare, he asked in a threatening voice, "What do you want?"

"I wonder? It depends on what you can do for me. No, before that, won't you show me your name? Since you know my name it would be unfair if I don't know yours. The trade starts from fair ground."

"... Release skill."

When he muttered in a low voice, the noise on the information window disappeared. It said his name was Shambala, and his profession was Saint Assassin.

It was a profession Ark had never heard of. There were Thief professions in New World, but it was his first time hearing of an Assassin. Well, it wasn't surprising since Ark only knew 1/10 of the professions. But a Saint Assassin? What kind of ridiculous job was this?

'A holy assassin? Are you kidding me?'

What he thought was even stranger was that Shambala's name was still displayed in white. If a player attacks another player first, even if they didn't kill, the attacker's name turns gray. It basically means that although he's not a murderer, he's still a bad guy. As a result, even though the Soldiers wouldn't go so far as to attack, there were many drawbacks because favor with NPCs would fall. However, Shambala's name was still white...

There was also the skill used to hide his info window; it seemed like he was a fellow who used a strange skill.

"Why didn't your alignment go down? Is that also a scroll?"

"..."

"If you don't want to answer, then whatever, see ya."

"It's a profession exclusive skill."

As soon as Ark whirled away, Shambala answered in a frustrated voice.

‘A skill...’

Once again, Ark realized the importance knowing skill information. JusticeMan’s recent tactics were also only possible because he knew the skills of other professions like the back of his hand.

In the future, he would often end up having to PVP when he went to high level areas. It would be very disadvantageous if he couldn’t figure out his opponent’s skills. As much as Ark worked hard to hide Dark Walker skills, figuring out other professions’ skills was also important. It was even more so for the profession of a player who might become an enemy.

“Description?”

“‘Death’s Agent’, if you get permission from the Death God for certain behaviors, if you commit a misdeed or even kill a player, you won’t be made Chaotic. As long as you’re not caught by other players or NPCs, whatever you do is fine. While the Death’s Agent skill is active, other people can’t even look at your info window.”

Shambala answered as if there wasn’t really a need to hide it. Well, even if you knew about it before hand, it wasn’t a skill that could be blocked.

‘There’s no impact on your alignment even if you do something bad? Isn’t that a scamming skill? Doesn’t it mean he could even beat a Merchant NPC to death and rob his shop if needed?’

Of course, there was no way the New World system was that easy. There was surely a considerable penalty to maintain balance. But to be able to commit evil deeds without punishment, depending on its use, it could be a very strong skill. Particularly against players...

After considering it for a bit, Ark thought maybe and asked, “Then, could you kill someone like Alan if you wanted to?”

“That’s too hard.” Shambala shook his head. “There have been many instances where my skill didn’t work against people at much higher levels than me. Someone with the Faith stat is also hard. Though well, turning Chaotic isn’t too much of a problem, but... Alan and I aren’t a good match. A Holy Knight is constantly receiving continuous aura protection, so it isn’t easy to get close to him even if I use ‘Stealth.’ A lot of my skills don’t work on him, either.”

In other words, if he had a good match on someone, he was confident he could win even against Alan. His voice sounded certain, in its own way.

Ark thought about it long and hard before nodding. "Alright, then let's do it like this. Throughout the progress of this quest, you'll help me unconditionally."

"What? You're gonna make me your lapdog?"

"There's only one day left until the quest ends. You said it took you two days to find me? And there's one day 'til the quest ends anyway. It's not such a bad condition, don't you think?"

"...What the hell do I have to do?"

"You'll have to find out and see."

"You'll keep your promise, right?"

"Of course. Didn't you say that the item is useless to me anyways? Then isn't selling it for a profit and getting rid of it best for me?"

"Sell? Surely you're not saying you'll sell it to me?"

Shambala's eyes abruptly narrowed.

Ark's eyes widened in surprise at that reaction. "Would I just give away a 220 Gold item to someone I hardly know? As long as you follow your promise to follow my orders for the duration of the quest, I'll be generous and give it to you for 300 Gold. Even this much is really generous for me."

"300 Gold?"

"Think of 70 Gold as a fine for trying to kill me. It's fine if you don't want to."

"... Dammit. Alright."

In the end, Shambala answered while grinding his teeth.

'Huhuhu, I didn't do business part-time jobs just for the looks.'

When making a deal, it's better to set a slightly difficult condition in the beginning. If Ark had asked for 300 Gold from the beginning, Shambala would have probably tried to haggle. But if a price was named after putting down an outrageous condition, it's a human tendency to lose the ability to think about the price. That's because they would be too worried about losing the trade from being too greedy and bargaining.

He actually didn't know if there would be a use for Shambala or not. He had just used it as a sufficient excuse to lead the bargaining into his favor. Thanks to that, he got an ally he could trust for one day and made an easy 70 Gold.

'Huhuhu, 70 Gold right from the start. Looks like things are going to work out nicely.'

It was more than enough compensation for being attacked from behind.

\* \* \*

'Sigh, they've still got a ways to go.'

He'd dropped by the barracks, but the Guard was still snoozing away. Since JusticeMan, Roco, and the Guard had stayed up for a whole day, they were getting a bit of shut eye and had become living statues.

So, although Ark had forced himself to log in, there wasn't really much for him to do once he came in. Even so, he didn't want to leave again, so he was going to the refugee shelter to look around. However, when he saw the board that was suddenly set in the square, he couldn't help but sigh.

The true heroes who had gathered for Jackson!

The current 1st contributor in the Jackson Guards was the Holy Knight Alan.  
Contribution points: 37, 800.

Even though Ark was hunting like his life depended on it, in the end, Alan had exceeded him with 4 times the points. That was the difference between soloing and leading the attack raid.

Ark hunted with the Guard, but it wasn't a formal attack raid. The Militia was the same. Because of that, the contribution points from the monsters felled by the Guards weren't registered as Ark's. However, Alan's situation was different. He had gotten to Jackson before Ark and had snatched the position of the volunteer troop commander early on. Thanks to that, the efforts of not only the 1st, but also the 2nd and 3rd platoons were added bit by bit to Alan's total.

That was the special characteristic of the Holy Knight, a profession granting a tremendous benefit other players couldn't even imagine in a war situation.

Even in profession-only skills, the gap was widening. The Holy Knight profession skill granted a buff aura that raised the stats of every party member. So his contribution rose every time he used the skill, and since he commanded the

overwhelming force of Platoon 1, he was able to accumulate even more contribution. On the other hand, all of the Dark Walker skills were for soloing. He was confident he could win if he fought Alan one on one at the same level, but if they fought with the same number of teammates, it would be Alan's overwhelming win.

This was exactly that kind of situation.

Just then, the square suddenly erupted with noise.

Turning his head, he saw Platoon 1 coming into the castle.

The lucky leader who had recently risen in New World as a blazing figure in the battle, Alan, was confidently riding into the square on a white horse. He had handsome face, flowing blonde hair, and a shining, full set of Rare-grade armor. He exuded a forced that daunted observers with one look.

Once Alan appeared, the girls gathered in the square screamed.

"KYAA, it's Sir Alan!"

"Did you see the special TV report that was broadcast just now?"

"Yeah, yeah, I heard about it from a friend and downloaded it online."

"Isn't Sir Alan so handsome?"

"He could be a celebrity."

"And his overflowing composure, that air of gushing elegance, he's a gentleman from a wealthy family for sure."

"Ahh, won't he just look at me once?"

The women prattled as they gazed at Alan with desire in their eyes.

After his appearance on TV, Alan's popularity was rising rapidly. It was a world where one could earn wealth and fame simply by playing the game well. But on top of it all, he was good looking, looked loaded, had a sense of humor and leadership... damn, even his hair looked good. For the majority of the girls, who had seen the broadcast, especially those addicted to New World, Alan was the ideal of their dreams! He was their prince in shining armor.

As the girls made a fuss, Alan grinned as he waved. Though everything was enveloped in the Dark Fog, it was as though a ray of light shined through and

flashed off his tousled blonde hair and white teeth. That was the full effect of the special skill Halo, which was said to only follow distinguished bastards.

At Alan's adept showmanship, the girls fell over screaming wildly.

"Tch, he's playing around. Does he think this is a cheap third-rate drama?"

"Dammit, film your adolescent drama on a broadcast or something."

"He's acting like a celebrity just 'cause he was on TV once."

"Just who do you owe being first in contribution points to, jeez."

Unable to bear the injustice as they watched, a few guys muttered with jealous voices.

There were many players in the 2nd and 3rd platoons who bore complaints against Alan. He used his position as commander to openly lead the Platoon 1 into advantageous situations. Thanks to that, the 2nd and 3rd platoons couldn't keep up with the 1st platoon in points, even after running around like crazy. Despite it all, their casualties were double that of the 1st platoon's. As if it wasn't enough, now he was snatching away all the interest of the girls. As passionate males, gripping a little was a given.

However, Alan wasn't the one who voiced displeasure at their complaints. If he was the Prince, then they were the shrieking self-proclaimed Cinderella candidates.

"Oh my, what's with those guys?"

"Are you jealous cause you're a pathetic man?"

"Very funny. Why are they getting mad at Sir Alan for their own faults?"

They were still being reasonable up to that point, but their arrows soon turned to a completely off target.

"But what's that girl sticking to Sir Alan?"

"Yeah, she's always going around with Sir Alan, isn't she?"

"Is she his little sis or something?"

"No, I heard a little of their talk together before and they even speak informally with each other?"

"But why does she stick to him like that? Is she Sir Alan's wife or what? That eyesore\*."

"She must be following him around hoping to get something out of it."

"Seeing as she's draped in a jet-black robe, her personality is definitely gloomy too."

"Since she picked the pretty Elf, she's gotta look like an ugly maid in real life. They say it's a common case to change the face to the opposite look when making a character. The stronger the image complex, the stronger those symptoms. Though Sir Alan is an exception."

"Geez, it's just gross to imagine a girl like that sticking to Sir Alan."

Even in reality, it was the female mentality to badmouth when they saw a girl next to a famous, handsome celebrity. There was even someone who recently suffered hate and emigrated from the country when a picture of her sitting next to a celebrity got put up on the internet.

It was a behavior Ark couldn't really understand. If they had time to spare, they should just save up some money and buy some gum to chew instead. He didn't know why they trolled others when there was nothing good to be had from it.

As long as he didn't participate in something he couldn't understand, then whatever. But the target of their insults was someone he knew well. The woman next Alan was none other than Kang Mi-su, Lariette. As if it wasn't her first time hearing all kinds of slander, she had her hood down low as she trembled. About to turn his head away and pretend not to recognize such a pitiful sight, Ark froze in his tracks.

'That's really just too much...'

Ark didn't want to get tangled up with Alan or Lariette yet. Though he had narrowed the gap, he was still a long way from Alan. However, he was angry and spat a few words at the throng of thoughtless girls who were not only insulting Lariette right in front of him, but also following Alan.

"Aren't you being a little harsh to someone you don't even know very well?"

"What's with this guy?"

The girls raised their eyebrows as they glared at him. But Ark wasn't one to flinch from the looks of girls.

"If you're going to insult someone, shouldn't you at least find out who that person is first? The Lariette I know is not the type of girl who squawks at anyone, unlike you people. She is a sincere person who knows how to work hard for the future. It is not my concern if you like Alan, but liking him is not a sufficient excuse to slander others."

"My, how funny. Who do you think you are to tell us what to do?"

"Then who are you to insult Lariette as much as you want?"

At Ark's counter, the faces of the girls became even more venomous. They were just about to counterattack when Lariette turned her head with a slightly surprised expression, presumably having heard the arguing. Then she discovered Ark and murmured with an alarmed voice, "Ark?"

When Lariette approached, the girls backed off while muttering "tch" under their breaths. The basic characteristic of these kinds of girls was that they couldn't even squeak when confronted by the target of their insults.

"So it really is you, Ark!"

"Ah, yes... it's been a while." Ark sighed as he bowed his head.

He'd ended up meeting Lariette while getting angry. It wasn't really a situation he welcomed, but Lariette must have been pretty happy to meet him because she kept speaking with a bright expression completely different from just moments before.

"So you're participating in the event quest. It didn't occur to me at all. Did you join the Militia?"

"No. I've been acting with the Militia, but I received the quest from the Giran Magic Institute."

"Huh? Then do you mean to say that you've passed level 60?"

"Yes. I'm about level 70 now..."

To be precise, after joining forces with the Militia, he had gone up another level to 72.

Lariette's eyes widened in response to Ark's answer.

Ark had been level 35 when they had first met in New World. It was about a month and a half after he had started the game. Another month and a half had passed since then. Ark leveled up 35 times. Just looking at the number, it wasn't strange. But it was common sense in games that the higher your level, the harder it was to level up.

If it had taken ten days to get from level 1~10, then it would take fifteen days to get from level 10~20.

Of course, those rules also applied to Ark. After meeting Lariette while putting several hours a day into playing the game, Ark had decided to walk the path of a game for a living and his play time increased manifold. Furthermore, 35 levels was only possible because he had only faced stronger monsters than himself after changing his profession to Dark Walker. Honestly, considering Ark's play time, his growth speed had been incredible even when they had met at level 35.

Having no way of knowing this, Lariette showed a surprised reaction. "That's amazing. Truthfully, I thought you'd be doing well if you got to around 50..."

"I was lucky. But what about you, Miss Lariette?"

"I... I finally turned level 70 today."

"It must be because the Tarsha Labyrinth raid failed."

"How did you know about it?"

"I just picked it up from here and there."

"Yes, you're right," Lariette answered in a dispirited voice. "The raid we attempted then failed three times. As a result we actually lost levels while wasting a week. Because of that, it was an extremely difficult time for Alan. But since he leveled up well, unlike me, he is level 98 right now. If we had succeeded, he would have passed 100 by now."

It relieved him greatly to hear that Alan hadn't reached level 100 yet, but it wasn't something he could express in front of Lariette. Ark spoke with a tone that voiced regret, "So that's how it was. You must have also gone through much hardship, Miss Lariette."

"Since I'm 27th in contribution in this quest, I'm sure the situation will get a lot better as long as I can handle just more day. Though, well, that's also thanks to Alan."

Since she was part of Platoon 1, of course she was ranked higher than Ark. Still, to be in 27th place, it seemed like Alan was probably paying a lot of attention to her.

But there was something else bothering Ark. He didn't really like the way Lariette mentioned Alan at the end of every sentence.

'Does Miss Lariette also...'

About to think of something, Ark soon shook his head.

Just then, the Prince atop the white horse suddenly came up behind Lariette with his group of followers.

“Miss Lariette, what are you doing? Everyone is going to the inn.”

“Oh, Alan. You came at a good time. You remember this person, right?”

“Do I? Have we met before?” Alan glanced at Ark and tilted his head.

Ark’s face suddenly flushed. After meeting him for the first time in Jackson, Ark’s only goal had been Alan. He had intentionally avoided Alan after joining the quest because Ark placed that much importance in him.

But Alan really couldn’t even remember Ark. To him, Ark was no different from an NPC he had met on the roadside. Though he had not a sliver of desire to be acknowledged by Alan, actually being one-sidedly ignored made something indescribable surge within him.

“Ark. You don’t remember? You met him here before and I introduced you to him.”

It was then— a rough voice abruptly came from behind Alan.

“EH? Y-you bastard!”

Andel, who Ark had really not wanted to encounter, was also a part of Platoon 1.

‘Damn, this is why I didn’t want to do something to stand out...’

But since they had met, there was really no reason to avoid him either. Ark laughed as he muttered piercingly, “It’s been a while. I didn’t know you were still playing the game? Seems like you escaped your Chaotic status.”

“What? You rotten—!”

“Andel, stop. Can’t you see he’s talking with me?”

Just as Andel was about to come at him, Alan made a face and glared. Then Andel wavered as he took a deep breath and stepped back.

‘Was Andel acquainted with Alan?’

Alan made Andel back off with one word. It wouldn’t have been easy to do if their relationship had formed in the game alone. Therefore, it was likely they knew each other in real life as well.

'Is that how Andel recovered so quickly after being totally wrecked by me? Well, it wouldn't be all that hard if a player like Alan was backing him up. And if he was backed up by a high level player like Alan, their relationship must be pretty close. No, there's a chance most of the players in Platoon 1 are examinees, like Lariette and Andel. I didn't like him from the beginning, but there's yet another reason why I hate Alan.'

While Ark was having such thoughts, Alan, who had been whispering with Andel, slightly turned his gaze.

"Come to think of it, I do remember. Ark, I apologize if you were offended."

"It's alright. Things like that can happen," Ark replied in a cold voice.

Then, with an uncomfortable expression because of the odd mood, Lariette suddenly grabbed Ark's hand and said, "Ah, that's right, why don't you join Platoon 1? It would be fine at your level, we lost some people in the last battle so we have some openings in the raid. That's okay, right Alan?"

Lariette surprised Ark by suddenly grabbing his hand, but the one who reacted more sensitively was Alan. He frowned as he briefly glared at Ark before saying with a displeased voice, "It's true there are openings. But there are already people waiting to be added at an opening, so... I may be the commander but I can't just add people I don't really know. And since it looks like there's some bad blood between you and Andel..."

"But Alan, I know him very well."

"Platoon 1's command structure is already set. We'll have to fight the hardest battle for the last day of the quest, so adding someone who doesn't match our rhythm could break our formation."

"But..."

"It's fine." Ark cut off Lariette and shook his head. "As I said before, I also have people I'm working with. I would have to turn down an offer to join Platoon 1 anyway, so there is no need for you two to fight."

Even if there wasn't the Militia or Guard, Ark didn't want to be Alan's subordinate.

One could say it was the jealousy of the good guy or the pride of the bad guy. He just wanted to engrave his name in Alan's mind with his own strength.

"Then there is nothing more to say. I'll take my leave. Miss Lariette, let's go."

Alan looked down on Ark from atop his white horse before whirling around. Then he headed to the inn with his shrieking lady fans behind him. After briefly following Alan's departure with lonely eyes, Lariette bowed crisply to Ark and turned.

"I'm sorry. Ark."

Her strangely regretful voice grazed past his ears.

'Just why is she sorry? Alan or Andel's attitude? Or not being able to put me in Platoon 1?'

Ark sent her a questioning look, but she was hurriedly going after Alan. Gazing at her, Ark casually remarked to the murderous Andel, "Considering your attitude, I think I can roughly guess your relationship with Alan."

"What?"

"Your master is going. Shouldn't you hurry and follow him?"

"You bastard, I'll let you go for now but just wait and see after the event quest!"

"If you want your stats to go to 0, then anytime."

At Ark's brazen answer, Andel clenched his teeth, glared, and left with Platoon 1. Then, a little while afterwards, when Ark was about to turn around, a message window popped up before his eyes.

– Alan has used [Feather of Whispering] to initiate a private chat.

Whispering was a method of communication that allowed two people to have a private chat. It was only possible if you used [Feather of Whispering] or the [Secure Communication] scroll when you knew the other's name and they were in a set range; in other words, it was a costly method.

'What? Did he change his mind to tell me to join Platoon 1?'

Without much thought, Ark permitted the whispering. Immediately afterwards, the volume from his surroundings dimmed and he clearly heard Alan talking into his ear.

- You said your name was Ark?

He was speaking rudely right from the start. Ark frowned as he answered.

- So what?
- Do you know Lariette well?
- And why should I answer that?
- Well yeah... Anyway, I'll give you one piece of advice. It'd be best for you to not think of dabbling with Lariette. Both in the game and in real life.
- It seems you're giving advice to the wrong guy? I wasn't the one who initiated a conversation with her. And even if I did, it's not something that concerns you. Truthfully, hearing something like this from you makes me feel pretty pissed off.

Then Alan laughed in a low voice.

- You still don't get why Lariette suddenly grabbed your hand?
- What? What do you mean?
- You're as dull as you look. Think long and hard about it. And don't forget my advice.

After saying only what he wanted to say, Alan ended the whisper.

'W-what? This jerk? Isn't he a completely two-faced bastard?'

Ark felt like he was hit with a bucket of water while sleeping.

Both the Alan who had appeared on TV and the Holy Knight Alan were very cool and well-mannered people. He had a cockiness that looked down on people, but from the outside he looked perfect. But his voice in the whisper was completely different. Wasn't it a blatant way of talking to slight his opponent, and didn't he also show a strange obsession, treating Lariette as his possession?

'Just what are you telling me to think long and hard about? What's wrong with Lariette grabbing my hand?'

He couldn't understand what Alan meant to say with those words, but he didn't have the time to ponder it for very long.

"Ark!"

He turned at the sound of someone calling from behind him to see JusticeMan and Roco running towards him.

"When did you login?"

"Just a while ago, but anyways, it seems like something urgent has happened!"

“Something urgent?”

“Yes, Sir Cross found me as soon as I logged in. He said the Lord was looking for you, so it can’t be normal. He asked that I find you and relay the message with an extremely stricken expression.”

Come to think of it, it was also strange that Platoon 1, which had been keeping the line of defense while doing almost all of their resting and treatment outside the castle, had suddenly returned. There was no doubt they had received some kind of order from the young Lord. Well, it was true that there was only one day left until the event quest’s completion.

Ark had not expected the quest would just end like this. It was time for something decisive to happen.

“Alright, let’s leave at once.”

## **Act 5 : Operation Bomb the Scorch Cannons**

After arriving at the Lord’s Castle, Ark encountered an unwelcome face again. When Ark’s group followed Cross inside, Alan, who was already there, made a slightly surprised expression.

Only the leaders of each raid had received the young Lord’s summons. It wasn’t a place for a regular grunt who wasn’t even the leader of the Militia composed of low-level players. But Alan soon turned his head as if uninterested. His attitude was like a noble ignoring a commoner.

‘That bastard, he’s getting more and more irritating.’ Ark was even more displeased with Alan’s attitude.

Then, the young Lord looked around and spoke, “All of you worked hard to protect Jackson Castle. I’ve sent out summons, even in this busy time, because a pressing situation has arisen. Raymond, explain.”

“Yes, this morning, at dawn, the scouting unit discovered enemies moving towards the plains to the west of Jackson Castle. There are around 600 of them. They are currently divided into two battalions; each is transporting a scorch cannon.”

“Scorch cannon?”

The commanders stared at each other with quizzical looks.

The young Lord explained with a heavy voice, "They are the mobile cannons that intercepted the airship, steel-armored merchant vessel, and tank sent by the three guilds."

"Those black fireballs back then!"

"You must know their power well, as you have already experienced it. It has been just half a day since a scorch cannon attacked Jackson Castle. The result of that is the current Jackson Castle you see now. We mustered all the magic power from Jackson's Magic Tower to erect a shield at the castle walls, but it couldn't resist. If their other mobile cannons had not moved to intercept the three guild's volunteer troops, the castle may have already been turned to ruins."

"What a big problem."

"If the two scorch cannons are left to situate themselves within range, Jackson Castle won't be able to hold for even half a day. Our only option is to carry out an ambush operation now, while the scorch cannons are on the move, and blow them up. The reason we called you all here is to discuss that operation."

The young Lord scanned his surroundings before speaking to Alan. "With the situation like this, we must wage an all-out war and stop the scorch cannons without fail. Therefore, when the Sylphid Knights return, they will blockade the front gate and stall for time. During that time, I'm thinking of dividing all our forces in Jackson's line of defense into two units to attack one scorch cannon each. First, I will entrust the first unit to Sir Alan. I leave the details of the formation and strategies to you."

With his level, Fame, and his occupation of 1st place in contribution among the volunteer troops, it was an obvious result that the young Lord would entrust the command of the first unit to Alan.

Alan nodded smugly. "I understand."

"Then, the second unit will be..."

When the young Lord turned his gaze, the warrior in charge of Platoon 2 lifted his head stiffly. He thought he was the obvious choice after Alan. But the person the young Lord chose was a nameless, ordinary player.

"Ark, it'll be good to leave it to you."

“Huh?”

Alan and the leaders of Platoons 2 and 3 made bewildered expressions.

This was something Ark had never expected, so he wore a shocked expression. Ark's contribution points were still struggling in the mid-upper levels. How could he be suddenly entrusted with such a task?

If someone was registered as a commander of a special task, of course they would get additional EXP and contribution. Alan was able to take 1st place in the rankings because of this. Because of this, anyone would want to become the commander of a large operation.

But passing over the leaders of Platoons 2 and 3, who were in the top 10, and giving the position to Ark was something they couldn't accept. As expected, Alan immediately raised an objection.

“Please wait a moment! That person still hasn't accumulated enough contribution for this. To entrust such a large undertaking to him, it's not a sensible judgement. Also, it isn't fair.”

‘Dammit Alan, you bastard. Saying useless things...’

Ark wondered inwardly. New World was a game, but NPCs thought the same way real people do. They couldn't act without sufficient reasoning, and this was more pronounced in management NPCs like Lords. They would help someone they had high intimacy with if it was something trifling, but they couldn't designate command of an operation with Jackson's fate depending on it without any justification and intimacy alone.

Alan was pointing that out as he demanded a revision. But the young Lord's decision was a result of factoring in a value that Alan, and even Ark, hadn't known.

“That's not it. This task is being entrusted based on operation performance evaluation criteria; according to Raymond's report, you, the commander of Platoon 1, have the highest operation performance evaluation, and then Ark. Though, it's just a hair's breadth from Platoon 2's commander.”

‘Operation performance evaluation!’

That was the value he had raised while doing Raymond's quests. He hadn't even imagined such a thing would come into play like this.

He completed about 30 small sub-quests, thanks to that, his operation evaluation had risen considerably; on the other hand, since Alan and the commanders of Platoons 2 and 3 got contribution and EXP just from being there, they had ignored Raymond's meagerly rewarding quests. As a result, the only operation evaluation they had was what they had received from being registered as commanders.

Alan clenched his teeth as he looked at Ark. In such a case, there was no way the decision would be reversed.

"Then, let's continue with the briefing, Sir Alan, Ark. Discuss the formation between yourselves."

Th-th-thump, a quest window popped before Ark's eyes.

Hero Assembly!

\* Sub-quest: Operation Bomb the Scorch Cannons

The two scorch cannons possessed by the Army of Darkness are advancing on Jackson Castle. If the scorch cannons get into range, they will place Jackson Castle in great jeopardy. Therefore, Jackson's Lord has suggested an operation to stop the scorch cannons.

– Quest success conditions: This quest is split into A and B groups. All players in the defense of Jackson must choose between the A and B group. Upon completion of the quest, all players in the group will be awarded bonus experience and contribution.

– Quest failure conditions: Quest automatically fails if all players are killed during the operation or if they are unable to complete mission within the time limit. Also, if both A and B group fail and the 2 cannons get within range, and start attacking Jackson Castle, then the main quest will fail even if there are still surviving players.

\*Time limit: 3 hours

\* Ark is currently the leader of Group B. A player registered as a Commander obtains a 20% bonus in experience and contribution points. However, there is a -30% penalty upon failure.

Difficulty: D++

A sub-quest that could possibly cause the main quest to fail!

"Well, then let's divide up the troops now," said the young Lord while looking at the Commanders.

Having finished reading the quest info, Alan suddenly smiled coldly as he spoke. "Are the volunteer troops free to choose which unit to join?"

"Yes, it'll only work if the group works well together, so I will honor the decisions of the field commanders."

"Then Platoon 1 will of course be in Group A, but what will you do, Platoons 2, 3 and the Militia? It doesn't matter to me either way."

"Platoon 2 will also join Group A."

"We will as well..."

After seeing the look in Alan's eyes, the commanders from Platoons 2 and 3 quickly answered.

The young Lord spoke with a shocked expression, "What? Wouldn't that be a problem? If the whole force goes to Group A, then what is Group B supposed to do?"

"Isn't there still the Militia and the Jackson Guard remaining?"

"But the Militia only amount to 20. The Guard is only 30, and even combined they only amount to 50."

On the other hand, Platoons 1, 2, and 3 combined amounted to around 120. Though there had been casualties over two days of battle, their numbers were still twice that of Group B. Moreover, there were up to 300 monsters escorting each scorch cannon. Against that many monsters, all hell would break loose if there was a battle. In such a melee, no matter how sturdy their organization was, the Militia of level 35 players on average would be no help.

Alan answered with a smirk, "That is no concern of mine. They just choose the leader with the higher chance of survival. They don't trust someone who hid in a corner and racked up points with the management with petty tasks."

"But..."

"And rather than catching two rabbits, it should be less burdensome for Jackson as well to organize the forces to ensure that we can succeed with one. After taking care of one, the other shouldn't be hard to get rid of, after all. Of course, Group B is needed, since it would be hard if the enemy concentrated their forces. So, don't be foolish and just buy time until Group A takes care of one scorch cannon and comes to help. You should be able to do that much with 50 people, yes? How does that sound?"

The quest had a high degree of freedom, and Alan had struck its weakness precisely.

The quest said there had to be two groups, but it didn't specify that each group had to take down a scorch cannon. So it didn't matter if one group took down both, and even if they ran out of time and couldn't take down one of them, the quest wouldn't be unsuccessful.

Alan had nothing to lose from concentrating the power to Group A. Rather, it was a method that would ensure him EXP and contribution. Moreover, since the Guard led by Cross were NPCs, they couldn't be controlled by a player's whim, and the low leveled Militia would only be in their way. Therefore, he took the useful Platoons 2 and 3 and left those two for Ark.

'Alan, you bastard...!'

Curses were surging to his tongue. But JusticeMan spat out with a heavy voice before Ark could.

"This young little nipple-sucker talks dirty, how rude."

"What?"

"I get the gist of it from hearing you talk. There is always one like you, living for the taste of superiority. It's hopeless bastards like you that I hate the most."

"Hmph, thank goodness. I was worried the Militia would come crying to ask me to let them into Group A."

"What bullshit. I wouldn't join you even if you asked."

As JusticeMan snorted, Roco also gave him a tongue-lashing. But with no acquaintances among the players, there was no way Ark could sway the leaders of Platoons 2 and 3 anyway. Rather, they seemed to think Ark took the commander position of Group B unfairly, as their looks towards Ark were less than friendly. Thanks to that, Ark had no options.

He had no choice but to face 300 monsters with just 50 troops, half of which were the level 30 Militia.

There was nothing he could do about it, so he didn't want to seem like the troops were dumped onto him by Alan's coercion.

In the end, Ark nodded his agreement. "I understand, I will move out with the Militia and the Jackson Guard."

The young Lord nodded with a troubled expression. "Alright. If you accept it, then I have nothing more to say either. Let's proceed with what Sir Alan said for now. Operation starts in 1 hour. After you're done preparing, go to the Quartermaster. I will have him prepare the goods necessary for this operation."

\* \* \*

"Will this really be alright?" Cross asked with a worried expression. "There's definitely a point to Sir Alan's words. While we hold one monster battalion down, there may be a greater chance of success if Group A takes down one cannon for sure and combines with us to take down the other, but Group B might be unable to avoid annihilation. Even so, if we're sloppy about pressuring the enemy, Group A will certainly take heavy damage..."

Honestly, that was the problem. If Group A succeeded, then the main quest wouldn't fail. There was really no reason for Ark to move according to the plan. But since the Guard was part of Group B, he couldn't use the method of pretending to attack while stalling for time. If he did such a thing, his intimacy, contribution, and reputation would plummet.

'Either way, I have no choice but to move according to plan.'

Ark laughed with an indifferent expression. "Don't worry. There will be a way. No, I will find a way."

"Yeah, alright. I'll trust and follow you for now. I'll be preparing the Guard, so come find me when your preparations are done."

"Understood."

After leaving Cross, Ark went to the Militia and explained the quest. Having heard the circumstances, the Militiamen showed slightly disappointed looks. That they had to join Group B, which had no hope of success, seemed to weigh heavily on their minds.

"That's enough, going out in a blaze is better than sponging off a bastard like that. Yah!"

"Understood. We will only follow you, JusticeMan!"

As Justiceman shouted, the Militia just accepted it without objections. Once Ark shared the quest, the Militia automatically became a part of Group B.

'But really, what should I do now?'

He had gotten the quest for now, but he was at a loss.

The monsters they would meet on the way to the cannon weren't a problem. However, there were at least 300 level 80~90 monsters guarding the cannon.

'It would be possible if we lured out twenty to thirty of them at a time...'

For the most part, the monsters in a battalion were a collective whole. If one attacked, they would all attack.

Of course, it might be possible to lure out a few at a time using Dedric. But there was a limit to that as well, and this quest even had a time limit. Getting to the scorch cannon with just 50 troops, with alternating battles and rest, would take over 2 hours. If they met more enemies than expected, there might be less than half an hour, or only a few minutes left when they reached the scorch cannon. It meant that they had take care of 300 enemies and blow up the scorch cannon in just minutes; with just the Militia and the Guards, it was a hopeless quest from the beginning.

'Even if I somehow make it back alive, the difference between Alan and me, for this quest, would be like heaven and earth; if we both fail then we fail the main quest so I can't interfere with Alan. But still, there's no way to get rid of a few hundred monsters in an instant...'

Just then, an idea suddenly flashed into Ark's mind.

'Wait? A few hundred? That's right, that method might work...'

It felt like he was shocked back to his senses. Truthfully, the possibility was low. But if he could use this method, Ark definitely had a chance to succeed.

'Okay, here goes nothing. Let's go find out for now. There's no time.'

Ark immediately set off for the refugee camp that had been scraped together at one end of Jackson Castle. There he met up the airship's Bosun, Jabel, and consulted with him about the method he had thought up. Jabel listened for a moment, thought for a long while, and responded skeptically.

"Maybe. It's honestly hard to give you an answer right now. We attempted a crash landing and there wasn't a second explosion, so it's not entirely without hope, but before seeing it personally... and even if it's fine, the time to disassemble and reassemble would differ based on the situation."

"Anyway, so it is possible."

"Well, yes."

"The Magic Institute's help is absolutely necessary to save Jackson Castle. Will you help?"

"If it's something we can do, then of course. We are alive thanks you, Ark. In addition, we are people who came to save Jackson Castle. As the crewmen of the honorable Silver Arrow, it is our duty."

Jabel answered courageously, as befitting of the brave Captain's subordinate.

'All right then. It's not guaranteed yet, but at least there's some hope now.'

As expected, if you think about it, an answer will come. It was the advantage of a game with a high degree of freedom.

Having found a clue for the solution, he was able to relax a little and think about the situation more deeply.

'But even if I finish the quest, nothing will change in the end.'

Since Alan had swept up all the volunteer troops, that he would finish the quest was already no different from a proven fact. It meant the situation wouldn't change even if Ark succeeded; there would be no change in the rankings.

The best thing that could happen to Ark was if he succeeded and Group A failed. But this was Group A with 120 users at an average level of 80. Even for them, it wouldn't be easy, but there was little chance they would fail.

'I have to strengthen my resolve!'

Ark clenched his teeth. Truthfully, he had made a plan to make Group A fail. To be precise, it was a method he had thought of after meeting Shambala. But then again, if Group A ended up failing and Group B also failed, then the main quest would end in failure.

It would cause Alan despair but everything Ark had done for the past few days would turn to dust.

'However, I can't beat Alan without taking some risks.'

The quest wasn't the problem now. It had turned into a grudge fight with Alan, and that wasn't all. There was even Andel, none the worse for it even after being chewed and swallowed, sticking to Alan. It wasn't a time to hold back for fear of the losses.

'Alan, and Andel. You guys chose the wrong person to mess with.'

Ark made up his mind.

To be willing to use any and all methods, no matter how cheap...

Ark immediately took out his pot in an empty alley. Then he shook out the ingredients left in his bag and started cooking.

Howling Seasoned Chillies
---------------------------

A food made from the extremely stimulating fruit of a chilli tree; if eaten, an unstoppable heat will radiate from one's body. Warning, something might go slightly awry because of the severe heat.
--

Strength +10 for 5 minutes, 'Confusion' for 3 minutes after effects wear off
--

Intermediate Survival Cooking Effect: Adding spices will lengthen 'Confusion' by 5 minutes.
---

After making 120 portions in nearly 30 minutes, Ark stuffed it into a sack and went off to find Shambala.

Since Shambala didn't belong to Platoons 1,2, or 3, he shared the quest with him and made him join Group B. As he explained his cheap plan to Shambala, he soon narrowed his eyes.

"You said you had skills, but it's just something like this?"

"Say it simply, can you do it or not?"

"... I can do it."

"Good, there isn't much time left until we depart now, hurry up."

"Got it. I really don't know what the purpose of this is, but I'll do it since I promised."

Shambala took the sack with the Howling Seasoned Chillies and disappeared into the darkness.

Shambala was using 'Stealth' to go to the warehouse within the castle. The target was the supplies prepared by the young Lord for this operation — the food to be given to Group A would also be there. Ark asked Shambala to mix in the Howling Seasoned Chillies into the food in the supplies.

'Survival Cooking shows its effect even when mixed with other foods!'

It was something he had already proven. Moreover, if it was mixed in a different food, it became unidentified again and the additional effects couldn't be known without trying it.

'The food produced in the castle is small in quantity, but it has additional effects other foods lack. With a decisive battle in front of him, Alan will definitely eat the supplied food. If the effects show then...'

Since it was mixed in with other foods, every player in Group A might not be affected, and the effect would likely be greatly reduced. But even if only half were affected, it would no doubt to be a highly unfavorable situation.

It was a mean and cheap method!

The reason he hadn't used this method before wasn't because of his conscience. If there was a certain profit for him, Ark was willing to do any despicable deed without blinking an eye, at least in New World. He had only resisted because getting caught doing such a deed by NPCs or players would influence his alignment. But now he didn't even have to worry about that. There was Shambala's trump card skill 'Death's Agent,' after all.

'Hahaha, Alan you bastard. Have a taste of this.'

After finishing all his preparations, Ark went off whistling to find the Quartermaster.

\* \* \*

"We have provided supplies for the Guards separately. Here are the supplies for the Militia."

Having found him an hour later, the Quartermaster provided the supplies. As expected there were 20 units of food and 20 General Tool Boxes. Then, an NPC from the Magic Institute gave an orb the size of a soccer ball to the two groups' Commanders, Ark and Alan. The supplies mentioned by the young Lord had left out this.

"This is a magic bomb."

"A magic bomb?"

"Yes, the scorch cannon is encased in a layer stronger than steel. It would take a few hours to break it with your weapons. But if this magic bomb is installed in the machinery, it can turn a scorch cannon into scrap metal in one go. But, there is one thing you have to be careful about. Because we produced it in a rush, we weren't able to put proper safety devices on it. It should last a while, but... if you discover

some kind of weird symptom from the magic bomb, throw it away and flee to a safe place.”

“Understood.”

<b>Magic Bomb</b>
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A magic bomb made by the Magic Institute with great explosive power. However, it is unstable because it is still a prototype and may not be able to control Mana properly.
--

The bomb timer can be set from 10 seconds to a maximum of 1 minute. But because the safety devices are unstable, the switch will automatically activate and initiate explosion in 2 hours and 50 minutes.
---

Since the quest time limit was 3 hours, it meant the bomb had to be installed within 2 hours and 50 minutes and the remaining 10 minutes could be spent appreciating the scorch cannon explode in leisure as the quest was finished.

“It would be great if you don’t get wiped out quickly and have the monsters rush us.”

Taking and storing his supplies first, Alan spoke as he looked at Ark.

“The same to you.”

“You have a strong will, fine. Then shall we bet on who destroys a scorch cannon first?”

“Do as you please.”

As Ark answered bluntly, Alan snorted and turned his mount around. Then the 120 people in Group A went out the front gate like an ebbing tide.

Watching them leave, Cross abruptly scanned his surroundings and asked, “But, why haven’t Teach and the Militia come yet?”

The person Cross was calling Teach was JusticeMan.

“The Militia have already left for somewhere else. After we defeat the monsters and get to the scorch cannon, they will come, following our path.”

“What do you mean by that? Did you divide our already small forces?” Cross asked in a worried tone.

The Militia hadn't been a decisive help, but there was still a difference between having and not having them.

"They are preparing something we need for this mission."

"Just what is the plan?"

"It is difficult to explain it in detail right now. Won't you just trust and leave your life to me?" Ark spoke forcefully as he stared at Cross with serious eyes.

Cross met his gaze for a while before nodding. "Alright. Both you and I are undertaking this operation with our lives on the line anyway. Also, the Lord placed you in command. If you ask, we will follow."

"Thank you."

Like that, Ark went out the castle gate with just the Guards.

After advancing roughly 10 minutes from the gate, they came to a fork. These were the paths the two scorch cannons were coming from. Alan's troops went left, so, naturally, Ark took the right.

After choosing which path to take in the fork, the monsters started their full scale offensive.

"Kekeke, Humans. To crawl all the way out here!"

"Die!"

It was a unit of forty to fifty Shadows and Avengers.

"Knights forward, put your shields up and charge; strike the enemies in the lead. Archers, move to the flanks and block the movements of the rear enemies! If a melee breaks out, form up in 3 to 1 triangle formation!"

The Guard's movements were different from before. While Cross quickly sized up the situation and gave orders, the troops moved like clockwork.

Fifteen Knights ran out smacking Shadows with their shields. They rushed towards the knocked back Shadows as the Archers in the back let loose arrows that stopped the Avengers' movements with a Slow hex.

It was different from before, when they would all charge and deal a round of attacks, every man for himself. Like the cogs of a wheel intersecting, once they assisted each other their combined fighting force had a great increase.

This was the result of JusticeMan's so-called Spartan training.

"Attack the flanks as you charge the front again!"

After receiving JusticeMan's tactical training, Cross' ability to read the situation had improved enormously. On top of that, Ark made up for the deficit by adding generous amounts of food with additional effects. Thanks to that, with all sorts of abilities enhanced, the Guards were displaying greater skills than their levels would suggest.

'As expected of mister JusticeMan. To change NPCs like this in just two days...'

He was only filled with more admiration.

'In any case, it shouldn't be too hard to move to the scorch cannon with the Guards alone.'

It had been his greatest worry before leaving the castle, whether they would be able to defeat the enemies as they moved towards the scorch cannon with a small force, and also, if they could get to the scorch cannon in time. Those two alone were worries that were out of Ark's control.

But this battle made him sure it was definitely possible.

"We will eliminate the monsters as fast as possible and advance! Dedric, Skull, Plan A!"

"Okay!"

Clack, clack, clack.

With one Familiar rolling on the floor and the other flying in the air, Ark also leapt into battle. His successive critical hits erupted from his sharp sword attacks. He returned all of the enemy's attacks with critical hits, and he let fly kicks when he could to bombard the Shadows with status abnormalities.

Used to battling Shadows now, Ark could face five of them on his own. In addition, Shambala also had skills equalling Ark's. He didn't attack as aggressively since he had been dragged out against his will, but he easily fought three or four on his own.

With Ark and Shambala taking care of about 20% of the enemy forces, the Guards' burden were lightened considerably. Thanks to that, it didn't take long to easily wipe out the monsters. Having learned tactics, the Guards didn't lose much Health, either. It decreased the rest time and sped up the advance. But, there were more

monster units than expected blocking the road. Even though they were advancing while finishing one round of battle in 10 minutes, it took over 2 hours and 20 minutes to reach the scorch cannon. After finishing off the last monster unit and topping the hill, they saw a huge cannon made of steel within the darkness.

“Is that the scorch cannon?”

The scorch cannon reached a height of a whopping 20 meters. With a siding that looked like it was made of densely packed, small plates of iron, there was a huge arm-like thing extending from the upper level. A black flame was flickering from the five bizarrely clenched fingers. The thing that looked like an arm was probably the barrel that shot out the Mana surge.

Ruummmbble...

The cutter on the ground whirred softly as it rotated. It was slow, but it was definitely narrowing the distance between it and Jackson Castle. Alright, now the problem was the swarm of 300 monsters surrounding the scorch cannon!

‘The only thing left is to wait and trust in mister JusticeMan and the Militia!’

There were only about 40 minutes left before the time ran out. Even so, Ark waited patiently. The 30 Guardsmen couldn’t defeat monsters 10 times their number alone. Ark, Shambala and even the Militia wouldn’t make a difference. So, he had no choice but to take a gamble.

After 10 minutes had passed, Cross asked in a worried voice. “Just what are you waiting for? We don’t have much time left!”

“I know. But right now, it’s time to wait.”

“Just who are you waiting for? Are you talking about Sir Alan?”

“No. It’s mister JusticeMan and the Militia.”

“But don’t you know that even if they joined, the situation won’t change much?”

“I suppose it’s time to tell you. Actually...”

Just when Ark was about to say something, Shambala, who had been resting in the rear with an indifferent face, jumped up.

“Ark, it’s a scout!”

As Ark turned his head in surprise, about ten Shadows went up the hill, discovered Ark's party, and turned around in astonishment.

"Holy shit! Shambala!"

Ark and Shambala shot off like arrows and fell upon the Shadows. They both ran in and poured on attacks while dealing continuous critical hits. Once the Archers from the Guards joined in, the Shadows fell over weakly. But even Ark and Shambala couldn't defeat them all in just a few seconds.

In addition, they were scouts; from the beginning, they had no intention of counter-attacking. While the rest of the bastards were blocking Ark and co's attacks, one of them fled down the hill and let loose a piercing scream.

"Squaaaawk! Enemies! Enemies!"

And BAM! 300 monsters simultaneously turned to look up at the hilltop.

"There are Humans! Humans!"

The three hundred monsters ululated cries filled with exultation as they charged up the hill. Hiptons swung huge hammers, and Avengers riding lizards brandished their swords like crazy as well. Shadows followed after them like a swarm. That alone made them all waver.

"Th-this is the end!"

"If that many monsters come at us...!"

The Guards' faces drained of color.

There was despair even in Cross' eyes. "Da-damn it! If it's like this then I'll at least take one more with me! Everyone charge!"

"YOU CAN'T!" Ark screamed desperately as he blocked Cross' path.

"What? I can't? What do you mean?"

"There is no chance of victory if we fight like this."

"Then...?"

"All we have to do right now is focus on defending. If we defend, we can last to some extent even if there are three hundred monsters."

“Are you saying there’s a purpose for enduring?”

“This is a request. Please do as I said. Enduring for a long time is currently the only way we can survive.”

“Hnng... alright. Shields forward, block the enemy’s charge! Hold on until the end!”

At Cross’ order, the Guardsmen made a wall with their shields. Then, while roaring fiercely, the monsters and the Guards clashed. The attack of the Shadows and Avengers mostly bounced off the shields. A shield’s defense was usually greater than the defense of all the equipment combined. Of course, defensive power is useless if you don’t block, but if a Soldier gives up on attack and assumes defensive posture, their defense increases dramatically.

As expected, the Guards’ Health didn’t decrease by much despite taking the charge of monsters ten times their number. But the enormous, muscular monster resembling a troll, the Hipton, was not deterred by the defensive posture. There was an additional effect, ‘Disrupt Defense,’ with the blunt-edged weapon variety that the huge monster was swinging!

“Wooaaah!”

CLAANG!

When the Hipton swung down his hammer, three or four soldiers went flying with a Stun hex. Though just two of those Hiptons had appeared, the Guard’s formation collapsed in an instant.

“Shambala, I leave the Hipton on that side to you!”

“Sheesh, you’re really milking me for all I’m worth.”

“Don’t complain. You have to complete the quest, too, anyway.”

“I’m not interested in a quest like this, how many times do I have to say it for you to understand?!” Shambala complained as he ran towards the Hipton.

With the darkness attribute bonus, only Ark and Shambala were able to fight one on one with the Hipton.

“Dedric, attract its attention! Skull, attack! Plan C!”

Pow, pow, poooww!

Ark circled around the Hipton as he dealt successive critical hits. The slower they moved, the higher the chance of critical hits. On top of that, there was the additional damage of the Familiar Co-op Attack bonus, and the Counter Attacks he dealt while slipping past the occasional attacks.

With the flurry of damage, the Hipton, with Health numbering in the thousands fell to the ground in the end. Ark went to the front and let loose Counter Attacks while parrying the attacks of the charging Shadows.

Unlike dodging, blocking with a sword shaved away Health, but he had no choice. The ground was rotten and slippery from the Dark Fog, so he couldn't unleash agile evasive maneuvers like normal. What was worse, more than ten attacks flew in at once. Dodging them all was impossible!

But the situation took another turn for the worse. He couldn't ignore the Health that was dropping little by little from blocking all the attacks with his sword. In addition, there was a durability loss whenever he blocked an attack.

'Dammit, I won't be able to last long like this!'

Then, while Ark was groaning, he parried yet another Shadow arm that flew in and a message window popped up with the sound of a trumpet.

You have learned a new skill.

Parry (Beginner, Passive): You have become familiar with the defense of blocking enemy attacks by placing all your will into the sword alone. You will now be able to block enemy attacks with even greater skill.

Should Parry succeed, defense increases by 3 times your sword's damage. No loss in sword durability.

Then, there was a spark-like effect as a new window formed.

A new Chain Skill has been registered.

Chain Skill: When at least two skills that can be used consecutively are joined, they will automatically be registered as a new chain skill. If the skill is successfully executed, the chain skill will activate and give you a chaining bonus effect. However, if even one of the chained skills fails, you will incur a penalty.

\* Current usable chain skills

Riposte (Parry + Counter Attack)

An advanced counter that sharply parries an enemy's attack and counters back.

Chain skill succeeds: 50% chance of knocking back the opponent 5-10 meters.

Chain skill fails: 50% chance of being paralyzed for 3 seconds.

‘A chain skill?’ Ark stared at the message window with a dazed expression.

Then, a Shadow extended its arm. Ark parried the arm with his sword out of reflex, then loosed a Counter Attack as he rotated. In that instant a spark flashed at the tip of his sword as the chain skill activated. The Shadow was flung back several meters, crashed into a pile with another monster, and sprawled on the floor.

‘So this is a chain skill!’

Ark felt like cheering. There was a special effect of knocking back his enemy 10 meters! In his current situation, it was more useful than a skill that just did more damage.

Ark quickly went into battle and abused the chain skill. His ability to judge the success chance of the skill was still low, so not all were knocked back. But Ark’s physical ability was excellent! He was soon grasped the timing of it and was able to raise the success rate.

“Riposte!”

Boom, boom, boom, boom!

The monsters attacking Ark were flung back in all directions. As if he were bowling, when one went flying, another collapsed in a heap. Thanks to that, he lightened the load on the Guards and the shaky line of defense regained its footing. And after ten minutes passed, they suddenly heard a resounding shout from behind the hill.

“I have arrived!”

Ark, Shambala, Cross, and the Guard turned their heads so hard they almost broke their necks.

It was JusticeMan and the Militia. They approached with the twelve crewmen of the Silver Arrow dragging a large object emitting blue light. A gun barrel in the form of a sharp trident, it was the Spear of Thor that had been attached to the airship.

That’s right, this was the emergency card Ark had brewed up. It was impossible for Group B to kill three hundred monsters within the time limit. While he was thinking, he remembered the scene he saw from the airship. The Spear of Thor, which had dealt crushing blows to three hundred monsters!

The conclusion of what he learned from Jabel and the Mechanic was the Spear of Thor hadn't taken too much damage from the crash landing. Also, he learned if they charged it with the magical power left in the engine, they would be able to fire it at least once. The problem was the time needed to disassemble it from the airframe, reassemble it with the engine, and then drag it all the way to the scorch cannon. It was why Ark sent the Militia as guards for the crew out first. It was also why Ark spent precious time to defeat all the monsters on the path, it was to clear out the path for the Militia that would follow.

"You finally arrived, you're not late!"

"Everyone, split to the sides and retreat at full speed!" Having figured out the situation at last, Cross swiftly barked out an order.

The Guard threw down their shields and fled to the rear. Vibrating like it would explode at any second, it was then that the Spear of Thor expelled lightning.

Flash, BOOOOOOOM!

A blue light pierced the darkness and painted the ground blue. Since it had been makeshift charged from the engine's magical power, it was weaker than when it had been used on the airship. But even that much was more than enough to flip the situation.

Monsters bathed in sparks instantaneously lost their Health and fell into critical condition. Even Hiptons with their thousands of HP were down to just 30%. And there was even a Paralyze hex from the lightning as a bonus!

"Now's the time, ATTACK!"

"WOAAAAAH!"

At Cross' order, the Guards rushed in with recharged morale.

Even if the enemies were 10 times their number, it was a different story if the opponent was in critical condition. Moreover, if they were also paralyzed, then it was no different from striking a scarecrow. Since the Militia joined in as well, the monsters were quickly reduced in number. Ark was running around excitedly killing monsters when Shambala yelled from beside him.

"Now's not the time to do this, stupid!"

"What?"

“Quest time limit!”

Ark immediately came back to his senses. He urgently checked the quest window and found that there was only 20 minutes left.

‘Riposte!’

Ark used the chain skill to knock back the swarming Shadows and ran towards the cannon. When he went inside, he saw a power source spewing black smoke within a complex maze of pipes. He instinctively knew that was the place to put the magic bomb.

‘There!’

“Master, watch out!”

The instant Ark stepped forward, Dedric suddenly screamed. He reflexively jumped back as an enormous axe grazed past and struck the ground.

“How dare the likes of a HUMAN try to sully the scorch cannon guarded by ME!”

‘There was still a monster left?’

Startled, Ark twisted his head around. That instant, a huge monster leapt from the darkness and rammed into his chest with its shoulder.

Flung into the air, Ark rolled out of the scorch cannon. When he initiated a forward roll and sprang up, a monster holding a blood red axe walked out from the entrance.

A Shadow 5 meters tall wearing thick plate mail!

A warning message popped up in front of him.

– Mini boss monster ‘Gun Captain Narak’ has appeared!
---

‘Oh shit, a mini boss...!’

“Go to hell, Human!” Narak shrieked as he ran forward.

Ark parried Narak’s axe as he loosed a counter. Chain skill! But Narak only flinched back one step and immediately rushed in to swing his axe like crazy.

Claash, CLAAASH!

He raised his sword to block, but he lost a whole 150 Health.

Narak's level was a whopping 130. Since it was a mini boss, it probably didn't have as much additional Health as a regular boss, but as far as levels went it was higher than the Adelaine he met inside Gallic's stomach. In addition, since it was draped in plate mail that looked more than several centimeters thick, its defense couldn't be compared to Adelaine's.

"Dammit, Dark Blade!"

Ark kicked off the ground and swung his sword. As the blade that became one with the darkness plunged into Narak's throat, he screamed. A critical attack ignoring defense! But as if he didn't take a hit at all, Narak grabbed and lifted Ark by the neck. He choked as his strength seeped away.

"The likes of a Human dares—!"

"Dark Dash!"

Dedric fiercely charged into the arch of Narak's nose. As Narak flinched and took a step back, Skull quickly rolled in under his feet. Stepping on Skull and losing balance, Narak staggered. Just then, a shadow rapidly narrowed the distance and leapt up like a panther as two daggers slashed at Narak's wrist.

At last, the hand clutching his throat loosened. Ark kicked upward and broke free from Narak's grasp. Nimbly landing like a cat, Ark gasped deep breaths as he turned his head. The person who had attacked Narak's wrist with a pair of daggers was none other than Shambala. Ark laughed while breathing roughly.

"I didn't know you'd come even when I didn't call."

"It's a problem for me if you die," Shambala muttered as he watched Narak in a crouched position. "The others are too busy finishing off the minions. It's just you and me."

"Alright..." Ark nodded. The Guards and the Militia were crazily fighting the three hundred monsters. In fact, it would be more troublesome if they came to help. If Narak and three hundred monsters got mushed together in a melee, the situation would become even more difficult.

"I'm going in first. Join in when you can, newb!"

As Shambala used his skill, and he vanished with a poof right where he was sitting. Then, he suddenly appeared several meters ahead and swung his daggers at Narak. With a roar, he landed a critical hit. Narak swung his axe with a cry of rage, but Shambala slipped past the entire attack with peculiar footwork and flowing arm

motions. It looked like he wasn't affected at all by the slippery ground. Then, he connected swings of his dagger with his evasive movements and dealt critical hits at a high rate. They were similar to Ark's Counter Attack, but they were far more skilled and smooth movements!

'That movement, I've seen it before somewhere...'

Raking through his memories, Ark soon remembered.

'That's right, that's Chinese Martial Arts!'

Back in middle school, it was when a friendly match between the Taekwondo Dojo and Kung Fu Dojo training instructors started. Then, when the two gym's masters came forward for a spar, he had seen the Kung Fu Master displaying such movements. Seeing the Kung Fu Master dodging the Taekwondo Master's rain of kicks and countering with movements like Shambala's had enraptured the disciples.

He thought the Kung Fu master had called that technique 'Qigong'.

The feeling of the movements the Kung Fu Master had shown then and Shambala's were similar. He gently flicked his fingertips to change the trajectory of Narak's axe, which struck the floor.

Of course, skills are skills, and a game is a game. No matter how skillfully he used qigong, the damage registered in the system couldn't be entirely ignored. But when Ark checked Shambala's Health, it seemed that qigong reduced the damage taken by 80% when successful.

'As expected, Shambala doesn't just have a special skill.'

Ark used Taekwondo to access the game's hidden skill set. Shambala likely used Chinese martial arts to attain similar results. Shambala's peculiar sense of confidence Ark had felt from the very beginning — this was exactly why.

'Well yeah, the Jujitsu that mister JusticeMan said he learned was also registered as a skill from martial arts he had learned in reality. If he's someone who learned martial arts like mister and I, then it's likely that the level of his base attack skill is high.'

"What the hell are you staring blankly at?" As Ark watched vacantly, Shambala shouted in a frustrated voice. "If you've figured out my style, then you know what to do, right?"

Of course he knew. Ark regained his bearings again thanks to Shambala and narrowed his distance from Narak with footwork. The basics of all martial arts

comes from the footwork. Especially in Taekwondo, which used kicks, the footwork was the most important fundamental in determining the level of attack and defense. Finding his normal rhythm again like that, Ark took in short breaths as he began releasing a fury of kicks.

Roundhouse kick, front kick, back kick!

At his kicks that stormed in like a gust of wind, even Narak flinched and backed away. As Ark unleashed his full-scale offensive, Shambala's attacks gained speed as well. When there was a gap between Ark's kicks, Shambala's dagger pair pierced a vital point, as if he'd been waiting for it. Taekwondo and Kung Fu, two forms at the zenith of martial arts, were unleashing a combined attack in a virtual reality game. Since Dedric and Skull, who had experienced countless battles with Ark, added their assistance on top of that, the additional effect was incredible.

"Aaack, the likes of Humans—!"

Narak couldn't even swing his axe properly and stepped back several times in succession.

'This feels weird.'

This was the first time he was fighting with Shambala, but their rhythm matched well, as if he was a team-mate Ark had fought together with for a long time. Maybe it was because both of them were people who had polished their martial arts for a while, or because they were on the same wavelength in the system since both of them were of the darkness attribute. Shambala's Kung Fu and Ark's kicks both complemented each other as they bore down on Narak.

Actually, there was greater meaning to this than the simple cooperation of these two professions, the Dark Walker and Saint Assassin, in New World. In the game's history, the two professions were linked together by a connection from the Dark Ages. However, that fact was not yet known by either Ark nor Shambala.

However, Narak was also much stronger than expected. Even after taking Ark and Shambala's attacks for nearly 10 minutes, its Health had only decreased by 40%. On the other hand, getting hit full on by one of Narak's attacks by a momentary mistake would cost them 20% of their Health. Fortunately, the Guards and Militia were finishing off the minions and were on their way to help, so Ark and Shambala were able to receive the effect of Roco's song. Roco sang the 'Song of Recovery' that healed 200 Health over 3 minutes without resting. Therefore, as long as they weren't hit in succession, they could steadily recover Health.

‘There’s about 10 minutes before the quest’s time limit, I can win this if it’s with Shambala!’

Then, just when Ark was sure of victory, his bag suddenly vibrated as it automatically opened.

An orb the size of a soccer ball was emitting red light from within the bag.

The magic bomb’s Mana is going off!

Time left until the magic bomb’s explosion: 59 seconds.

“OH SHIT, 1 MINUTE...!”

Ark’s face paled. Now that he thought of it, he hadn’t entered the fact that the magic bomb’s time limit was 10 minutes faster than the quest’s into his calculations. If they couldn’t finish the battle within 1 minute, the bomb would explode! Ark and Shambala, and of course, Group B, would all take irreversible damage.

‘FRICKIN’ IMPOSSIBLE! We can’t take down Narak within a minute!’

If the bomb went off like this, they would be annihilated for sure. Then there was only one method left — they would have to give up on the quest and throw the bomb far away.

Seeming to have understood the situation as well, Shambala shouted in an urgent voice, “Give up on the quest! You can’t self-destruct for the sake of some contribution points!”

“I know!”

‘Dammit, to have to give up on the quest after coming this far...’

But there was no choice.

‘It can’t be helped.’

It happened when Ark clenched his teeth tightly as he pulled out the magic bomb. With exquisite timing, one of Shambala’s strikes brought down Narak’s Health to exactly 50%. In that instant, Narak suddenly set his axe upright as he struck the ground, releasing a roar at the sky.

“YOU BASTARDS... I WILL KILL YOU, AAAOOO!”

That was when Ark's body stiffened.

'Oh, hell no!'

Narak's special skill 'Howling' has taken effect.

All players and NPCs in range have been paralyzed by violent Fear that seizes the mind and body for 1 minute!

"KEEUK, you shitty fly bastards!"

Narak's eyes glowed as he approached.

'Is this the end?'

Ark was in despair. If he took a hit from Narak like this, he would die. Even if he wasn't hit, he would die when the magic bomb went off. As soon as he got the Paralyze hex, the end had already been decided.

Just then, the rigidly stiffened Ark saw Skull. Unlike Dedric, Skull had immunity to Fear to some extent because it was an Undead; Skull crawled towards Narak while trembling uncontrollably. It was squeezing out all of its will to come to Ark's aid. Seeing that, something leapt and surged up within him.

"It's no use, Skull! There's nothing that can be done even if you block!"

CRUNCH!

In the end, Skull was trampled underneath Narak's feet and was forcefully recalled. But Skull's sacrifice made a miracle. Ark took over 200 damage with Skull's disappearance, and he instantly fell into critical condition and was dyed red.

You are in critical condition, so Indomitable Will and Indomitable Body have activated.

\* The set effect 'Adrenaline' has activated. Immunity to Fear has increased by 50% and you have broken free of the effect 'Howling.' Reaction speed has increased by 20%.

'Adrenaline!'

The Dark Walker originally had a 50% immunity to Fear. With Adrenaline's additional 50% on top of that, it became 100% and he was released from paralyzation.

Following the activation of Adrenaline, he felt a sensation like an electrifying current. His reaction speed increased explosively at the same time. Ark rapidly rolled as he evaded the axe. He checked the magic bomb's information, there was only 20 seconds left.

There was no way he could know how big the bomb's explosion range was, but he thought he could narrowly escape death if he ran about 100 meters and threw it. And in the instant when he was about to turn his body, countless thoughts abruptly erupted within his head.

'No, there's still a chance! Alright, I'll be frickin' amazed if I don't die!'

Ark turned around again and ran towards Narak.

Shambala and the other people were staring at Ark's indecisive actions with shocked eyes. But they were paralyzed, so they couldn't even move their mouths. They could only follow Ark's movements with their eyes.

Narak laughed as he swung his axe. Ark slid on the rotten ground as he struck the bastard's solar plexus with a back kick.

"KEUUUK!" Narak groaned uncomfortably as he staggered.

Then Ark kicked up with one foot as he struck the bastard's chin with a mid-air roundhouse kick, and then he shoved the magic bomb into Narak's gaping mouth.

"Y-you bastard! What are you... ack! Ack!"

The disconcerted Narak retched as he tried to spit out the magic bomb. Flinging himself up like a ball, that's when Ark's vertical front kick raged into Narak's jaw!

Narak's jaw flung up, and his mouth closed with a clack. Simultaneously, Ark landed on the ground and released the chain skill 'Riposte' with all his strength and knocked Narak back.

All these movements happened in just one moment.

BOOOOM!

Immediately afterwards, the sound of the explosion burst from within Narak's belly. His stomach inflated like a balloon before being sucked inwards. White smoke drifted up from his listless, gaping mouth. But even though the magic bomb had exploded within his belly, Narak was still alive. His whole body turning crimson, Narak stared at Ark with bloodshot eyes as he ground his teeth.

Double critical chance!

“Fuck off, DARK BLADE!”

– You have dealt a critical hit X2 with Double Critical Chance.

The final blow Ark unleashed made Narak’s Health reach 0 at last.

“Y-you... don’t even think of... returning alive... just because you... defeated me... AACK!”

He was truly as resistant as a cockroach. Narak spat out all the words he had to say even though his Health was at 0 before screaming and exploding. He was blown to bits in all directions, and while his flesh and skin went flying, Shambala, the Guards, and the Militia’s paralyzation was released as a cross symbol surfaced above their heads. A cross symbol appeared above Ark’s head as well.

– Your level has risen.

Everyone was granted enormous EXP. Ark and Shambala also rose 2 levels, and the rest of the party members also went up by 2 or 3 levels. Roco, who was at just level 25, rose 5 levels in an instant. Thanks to that, their Health and Mana, which had been grazing the floor, were fully restored. Ark and Shambala blew out a deep breath as they both sank to the ground. Shambala stared blankly at Narak’s corpse before snickering, then broke into laughter.

“Hahaha, you’re over average. That last part was really awesome.”

“Aren’t I the one to say that!”

Laughter escaped from Ark’s mouth as well. This was the first time he felt that fighting with someone was fun. However, the situation wasn’t that appealing. They had somehow defeated Narak, but there were still other minion monsters left. Moreover, the remaining time was now just 10 minutes. Since they didn’t have the magic bomb either, their method to destroy the scorch cannon within 10 minutes had also disappeared.

‘Quest failure can’t be helped. If we finish off the minions first and take some time to destroy the scorch cannon before returning, we should be able to secure some EXP, at least. Let’s get the items for now.’

There was a key dirtied with fingerprints, a parchment, and a ring where Narak had exploded.

“Information window.”

Bloodied Old Key

Written Instructions Stamped with Lord of Darkness Valderas’ Approval

The written instructions sent to Narak by the Commander of the Army of Darkness, Valderas. You can see the contents in detail if you search its information.

Resurrecting Spirit (Magic)	
Item Type	Ring
Usage Restriction	Level 70
The ring Narak dredged the last of his magic power to lay a curse on. If any player touches the ring, then the curse skill ‘Ultimatum’ that Narak invoked will activate. When the curse is released, it can be used as a normal magic ring.	
Option: Strength +5, Mana Recovery Speed +5%	

‘What? The curse skill Ultimatum?’

Then, while Ark was tilting his head as he looked at the message—

Narak’s ‘Ultimatum’ skill has activated.

By the power of the curse laid by Narak, all dead monsters within a 500 meter radius will revive as Undead for 30 minutes. Revived Undead will harbor great animosity towards living beings.

Along with the message, he heard Roco’s scream from behind.

“KYAA, monsters are crawling up from the ground!”

“H-how can this be!”

A choked scream flowed from Ark’s mouth too. The two hundred or so monsters they had finally managed to kill with the Spear of Thor were raising their bodies as Undead. The Hiptons, Shadows, Avengers. Even... wasn’t that a tattered Narak crawling out from the earth too?!

“Dammit, to think he set a trap like this!”

"There's no place to run!"

"God dammit, we even lasted until now.."

The faces of people in the Militia were sunken in despair.

But Ark shook his head.

'NO! There's no way! There's gotta be a method!'

Ark had succeeded in several quests with difficulties that were unthinkable with his level until now. If there was something he had learned while doing them, even in a quest that seemed impossible, there was always a clue prepared to breaking free of a crisis if you looked carefully enough.

What would determine life or death was how quickly the clue was found!

Ark stared at an item on the ground.

'This time, this is the clue. If what I'm thinking is right...'

Ark grabbed the item and ran towards the scorch cannon.

"Shambala, mister JusticeMan. Come into the scorch cannon and blockade the entrance!"

"What? What are you saying? In this situation where we can't even *run away*?"

"Just believe in me and follow!"

"... Alright. Everyone, let's go to the scorch cannon!"

Once JusticeMan made the order, the Guards and Militiamen followed Ark in. Ark raced up the revolving stairs inside the cannon. At the top was a huge room completely open on all sides. After rapidly glancing around his surroundings, Ark soon discovered a machine filling up an entire side of the room. It had several levers, and he saw a keyhole inside.

"Discerning Eye!"

Once he used the skill, the unidentified key's information appeared.

Narak's Key (Special)

The key Gun Captain Narak used when controlling the scorch cannon.

‘As expected, this was the answer; this key is the master key that moves the scorch cannon!’

Ark ran forward one step and put in the key. The scorch cannon vibrated as four legs protruded from its lower frame, fixing it on the ground. When the stationing ended, a pitch black flame flickered in the window. When Ark grabbed the lever and tried moving it, there was the sound of machinery as the cannon rotated.

‘Shall we try testing its power?’

Ark adjusted the cannon to set the aim on the swaying, swarming Undead. Then he firmly pressed a button attached to the side and the cannon vibrated violently.

Ruummble!

The scorch cannon that had reduced Jackson Castle to ruins and had crashed the airship with a single blow!

The same terrifying force was unfolding before his eyes. Once the scorch cannon heated up, a black energy raged out like a storm. The Undead swarming around the scorch cannon were literally torn to rags and went flying. Undead Narak was no exception either. As soon as it crawled up from the ground, it was swept up into the scorch cannon’s storm and lost at least 50% of its Health in an instant.

– 3 minutes before the scorch cannon’s energy recharges.

‘Huhuhu, this is exciting!’

The Undead that survived swarmed around the scorch cannon. But the steel-encased scorch cannon did not even budge an inch. Then, the recharging was done. The storm of black flames rose once again! Undead Narak couldn’t endure any more either and disappeared. Three hundred undead monsters had been swept away with just two shots.

“A-Ark!”

Having leapt up helter skelter to the top floor, JusticeMan and Roco shouted with deeply moved voices. But Ark didn’t even turn his head and rotated the cannon. There was still something he had left to do. He scanned his surroundings with Eyes of the Cat and spotted the other scorch cannon far away.

‘That bastard Alan failed!’

The scorch cannon's time limit had already passed. The other scorch cannon was fine and well which meant Alan had failed the quest! Shambala seemed to have checked the scorch cannon as well as he approached from the side, then butted Ark's shoulder and whispered, "Seems like your wicked trick worked out."

He was talking about the Howling Seasoned Chillies that had been mixed into Group A's supplies before departure.

Wordlessly, Ark smiled evilly.

'He must've gotten *lots* of strength from an unknown source for a while.'

Ark clearly envisioned what Alan had experienced. With the scorch cannon in front of him, Alan likely ate the food to brace himself for battle. And he must've been quite satisfied when his Strength strangely increased. At least, until five minutes passed and most people fell into Confusion.

Once he was Confused, he wouldn't be able to control his character. But before that, he would go around as he pleased blindly firing skills. Then, while he and his teammates were fighting hard in such manner, something would go slightly awry, and the conclusion was obvious.

Confusion generally had the shortest effect duration among the status abnormalities, but if one was to be hexed with it once, then it was treacherous, since there was no knowing how the situation would unfold.

'Alan, you scoundrel, it would be good if you died...'

It was simply wishful thinking. It seemed like the possibility of Alan's prospects turning dark were slim considering Alan's ability, but...

"Holy Knight Sir Alan, I shall accept the quest you have failed."

Ark aimed the scorch cannon and pressed the button.

A huge black flame gathered before his eyes before shooting off into the darkness. And, a little while afterwards, he saw the scorch cannon slowly collapsing with a roar from afar.

Thu-thu-thump, that was when a resonant drum sounded as the quest was updated.

<p>* You have found a hidden conclusion to the sub-quest 'Operation Bomb the Scorch Cannons.'</p>
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You have succeeded in defeating Gun Captain Narak and taking possession of the scorch cannon.

You blew up countless monsters and even the other remaining scorch cannon. Now there should be no way for Jackson Castle to take a scorch cannon attack. Rather, the scorch cannon will become used as a weapon to protect Jackson Castle from the Darkness Army.

This is a success no one expected or even hoped for, and you will be able to receive sufficient contribution for it.

Special reward: Monsters killed with the scorch cannon within 30 minutes X5, additional EXP and contribution, Fame +50

\* Commander's additional reward: EXP, contribution points +3,000. Fame +50

The cross symbol appeared above Ark and Group B's heads again. And then a level up, with contribution points and Fame, were added like crazy.

"Keuhaaa, is this what they call leveling up twice in quick succession? An awesome quest like this, it's a first!" JusticeMan also laughed broadly as he spoke.

"That bastard Alan, I wanna see what his expression will be."

## **Act 6 : Lord of Darkness, Valderas**

Move the cannon, aim, and FIRE!

When the black fireball hits its mark, it crushes the annoying monsters crawling around in an instant as it scatters them. Since it has a long range as well, even the monsters that looked like specks, far into the distance, were no problem.

Should he say that it felt like he was playing an FPS (First Person Shooter) game? His stress and fatigue flew away in an instant.

When he saw the message that 5 contribution points and EXP were added per monster, he had thought it was trifling, but he could fire the scorch cannon ten times in 30 minutes. The monsters destroyed in just one shot would range from a minimum of dozens to over a hundred, so his contribution points and experience went up like crazy. With 2 from killing Narak and 1 from the the sub-quest, Ark had

gone up 3 levels and was now level 75. Shambala also leveled up similarly, while the low-leveled JusticeMan, Roco, and the other Militia went up by at least 5 levels.

Had the level 30 players ever leveled up this astonishingly fast? The Militia were touched so deeply that they couldn't get over it for awhile. Ark's contribution points also went up from 9,000 to 18,000 in the blink of an eye.

– Ark's current contribution is 18,560. You are in 21st place.

'My ranking went up by 40 in an instant!'

He had finally started catching up to the players in Platoon 1. Alan was still leading the contribution ranking, however, the difference that had been 4 times as great had shrunken to 2 times. It felt like the fog had cleared, allowing him to glimpse the summit of the mountain at last.

'I don't know if I can beat Alan, but I might be able to get into the top 10.'

"You've worked hard. Rest a while."

Having reached the castle, Ark dismissed Group B and was heading to the Lord's Castle to report the result. However, while passing the square, he heard a ruckus off to the side. Turning his head, he saw the players from Group A, who had failed the operation and returned to gather there. Unlike when they had confidently departed, everyone was surrounding and glaring at Alan, Andel, and the rest of Platoon 1. He happened to meet them just as he was curiously thinking about what happened to Group A. Ark pushed through the crowd to survey the situation.

"If you've got a mouth, say something," snapped a Warrior.

"Just how are you going to take responsibility for this?"

"How is this my responsibility?"

"What?"

"I never carried out the operation arbitrarily. I always went forward while discussing it with the leaders of Platoons 2 and 3. Don't you think you're forcing it a bit by putting the blame for failure only on me?"

Alan held his head high and answered with an arrogant expression. The gathered users argued as though they couldn't believe their ears.

"We're not acting this way because we failed the quest!"

"That's right, because of the magic bomb that *you* threw, 6 people from our raid died!"

"Ours lost 7. Even our raid leader died!"

If you pieced together their words, it came down to this. As everyone had expected, Group A had easily reached the scorch cannon. Then they attacked the 300 monsters head-on. Their fighting forces were nearly equal, but as soon as the totally unexpected mini boss 'Gun Captain Najak' showed up, Group A was pushed back.

Alan was forced to call a retreat. The enemy was stronger than he thought, so he was going to raise their stats with food and individual buffs before attempting an all-out attack again. And as Alan planned, at first Group A unleashed a fierce assault as they pressed back the enemy. The problem was 5 minutes later...

Players suddenly began to go on a rampage. Hexed with Confusion, they went around casting their skills everywhere.

The 'Howling Seasoned Chilies' Ark had substituted in were showing their colors. But there was no one in Group A who knew they would fall into Confusion. It was because they had never heard of getting hexed from eating normal food. In any case, thanks to everyone going crazy, Group A took an enormous blow. Truthfully, up to this point, it wasn't Alan's fault.

However, before the Confusion wore off, the magic bomb's time reached its limit. Finally breaking free from Confusion, Alan had two options. To embrace the bomb like some kind of heroic trooper and die alone. Or, he could ensure his own survival no matter who else died.

'The choice Alan made is obvious even without seeing it.'

The Health of the players were already reaching rock bottom because of the Confusion. Since a bomb exploded in their midst, the result was obvious. 15 killed, with dozens more hurled into critical condition. The shocked Group A immediately retreated and the sub-quest ended in failure.

"We understand that it was an unexpected situation. But there was a lot of damage from *you*, the so-called *Commander*, throwing the magic bomb. That's definitely your responsibility!"

"Then what was I supposed to do? Was I supposed to embrace the magic bomb and die or something?"

"What?"

"The people who died just didn't have any luck."

Alan was smart. This may be a game, but he wasn't able to lead this many people simply with his high level. He needed wit, leadership, and charisma for it to be possible. Alan was equipped with all of it. As though that wasn't enough, he got one extra, unnecessary thing. The greatest disadvantage of those who think themselves clever; pride. Truthfully, no matter who looked at it, Alan was in the wrong. However, he didn't apologize. It was because of his pride that stuck with him to the end. It was the reason the players were angry. And, once the rage burst through the floodgates, it swelled uncontrollably.

Those of merit attract undue attention and envy. In order to command others, one cannot help but gain an egotistic side.

Alan has lived this way until now; there had been small complaints, but nothing had become too great of a problem. However, Alan's recent, rapid rise to fame had started drawing much jealousy. And, now that there was an excuse, people were attacking Alan left and right.

'This is why I don't like players.'

Of course, he disliked Alan even more. At first place in contribution, Alan was also firmly seated at first place in the players that Ark disliked. Thus, Alan's plight was Ark's joy. A wicked smile spread over Ark's lips.

'I worked so hard for this, it would be a shame to let it pass with just an argument. Now, shall we properly kindle this fire?'

"Dedric, this is a special task."

Ark summoned Dedric and whispered into his ear. Dedric's eyes sparkled as he pricked his ears.

"Oooh, as expected of Master! What a truly underhanded— I mean, awesome, idea."

"Think you can do it?"

"Just leave it to me, something like this is welcome any time."

Dedric smiled with a strange expression as he crawled low along the ground. Crawling between the feet of the noisily arguing players, Dedric was as nimble as a cockroach. In such a manner, Dedric crept past the players and leapt to attach himself to the rear of Alan's white horse. That was when a rough holler exploded out.

"Shut the fuck up, you bastards! Do you know who you're fucking with? You think I'm some pushover because I stayed quiet? You guys should just move as you're told! Dammit, do you think that I, Alan, would deal with bastards like you if not for the experience and contribution?"

The clamoring players suddenly quieted. Alan shook his head with a flummoxed expression. "N-no. I didn't..."

"This bastard, is that how he thought of us?"

"I can't believe my ears, seems like he's under the delusion that he can do anything he wants after being on TV once?"

"On TV, he said this and that about other people's help... so his true self was like this."

Players muttered in dejected voices. Even the women, who had always blindly taken Alan's side, whispered as they glanced at him disappointedly. Just then, another shout burst from *Alan*.

"I told you to shut up, you damn wenches shut up too! You wretched bitches, I put up with your annoying squawking and chasing after me, but you're betraying me now? Go to hell!"

"Wh-what? Bi-bitches?"

"Alan, that's too much!"

As the girls started to boil, the boys sprang up to shout insults at Alan. With a shaken expression, Alan backed up while shaking his head.

"N-no, it wasn't me who said that!"

"Are you thinking of treating us like idiots 'til the end? Who else is there but you, huh?"

Alan whipped his head around to see, but Dedric had already been unsummoned and had returned to the Netherworld. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Alan was suddenly stamped as someone with a dual personality.

"He has revealed his true colors at last."

"Sheesh, there are even guys like him?"

"What an unsociable jerk. I won't take your fucking orders anymore."

“Such a disappointment. I didn’t know he was such a person. Let’s go.”

The players quickly scattered, as if they didn’t even want to talk about it anymore. As though he didn’t quite understand the situation, Alan was left with a dumb look. 100 people had been gathered around him, but now there were only fifteen players left.

‘So pitiful. Well, he did do something worth becoming that pitiful...’ After leaving the square with the others, the corners of Ark’s lips rose slightly. ‘That’s why you have to mess with people secretly.’

It’s not like he didn’t think he went too far, but he hadn’t made Dedric tell untruths. The Alan Ark knew, at least, was a two-faced bastard for sure. There was no need to feel something like shame when telling people about the truth, right? Granted, he didn’t expect Alan would fall to the ground with something like this. But the players had abandoned him, so his contribution points that had been endlessly soaring up would inevitably falter.

‘This is the start. Alan, you’ve made an enemy of me. Don’t think that’ll end with just this. Someday I’ll expose your true identity in front of Lariette.’

Ark was growing more wicked day by day.

\* \* \*

“Ark, I heard the news from Sir Cross. You did it!”

The young Lord rejoiced as he ran over and took Ark’s hand.

“Not only did you stop the scorch cannon, you actually seized it! You have done us a great deed indeed. No words of praise are enough. We must immediately inform the residents of your heroic accomplishment. Raymond, write up a notice to put onto the message board.”

“Yes, sir.” Raymond beamed as he raised his pen.

“N-not at all. This mission was not something I did on my own. If not for the help of the Guard, Militia, and the crewmen of the Silver Arrow, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything. That’s why they are essentially the ones who completed the mission. If you are putting up a notice, please put their names rather than mine.” Ark spoke humbly as he refused the honor.

Just a few minutes ago, he had witnessed the fall of Alan, whose popularity had been flying sky high. Granted, half of it was Ark’s work, but regardless, it had

happened. Someone who sticks out draws attention. It didn't just apply to Alan. The object of envy soon becomes the object of bitter jealousy. Alan had the level and organizational power to deal with such attention, but the interest of other players was a considerably uneasy element for Ark. He could easily become the target of a Chaotic player, and it was obvious that many limitations on his actions would follow him. He wanted to avoid at least that at all costs.

'I'll just take the profit without sticking out.' That was the goal Ark had made while participating in this quest.

Having no way to know such inner thoughts, the young Lord nodded, deeply touched.

"I believe the fact that I have been of help, is a sufficient reward in itself."

"As expected of Ark! No need for a price on a good deed? You are truly a person who is like the crystal of chivalry. To be sure, that's why Father was able to trust you and entrust the keepsake to you. I understand, if you truly mean it, there's no helping it. Raymond, list on the notice that this operation was succeeded by the actions of the Guard, Militia, and the crew of the Silver Arrow, as Ark requested. Is that fine?"

"Yes, thank you." Ark grinned as he brought up the main subject. "Actually, I came to show you this, my Lord."

Ark held out the parchment he had obtained after killing Gun Captain Narak.

– You have checked the contents of 'Written Instructions Stamped with Master of Darkness Valderas' Approval.'

It told of the Gun Captains of the scorch cannons, Narak and Najak.

You idiots, what the hell are you doing that's taking over a week?!

Due to your incompetence, our Great Master Valderas has decided to personally lead the Demonic Army towards the front line. And, by demonstrating the Great Power of Darkness in person, He will annihilate each and every one of the weak Humans.

You two, move the scorch cannons to the location marked in the enclosed map before the full moon rises. As soon as Great Master Valderas arrives, we will assault Jackson Castle along with the scorch cannons.

“Valderas!” Exclaimed the young Lord in astonishment.

“Is it a name you’ve heard of?”

“Yeah...” The young Lord put a hand to his forehead as he rambled on with his inner musings. “I have seen the name in an old document kept inside the castle. I heard that Valderas was the one who ruled the current Jackson territory before the Dark Ages as a warrior of the legendary Draconians. It was said that he was an excellent Lord, but once the Dark Ages began, he suddenly transformed into a vanguard of the darkness and terrorized the continent. Then the 7 Heroes soon appeared, and I heard Valderas disappeared along with the Power of Darkness.”

“How did someone who disappeared hundreds of years ago—?”

“There’s no way to tell. Perhaps...” The young Lord continued speaking in a severe voice. “I am only saying this because it is you, but truthfully, ever since the unidentified Army of Darkness attacked Jackson, there has been much a lot of uneasy talk going around. The alarm that the darkness of the Dark Ages may be awakening is spreading dramatically. The Dark Fog covering Jackson shares many similarities with the Power of Darkness that can be found in the records of that time. It is part of the reason why the 3 Great Guilds sent volunteer troops so swiftly. Because if this matter is truly related to the Army of Darkness, then it is no ordinary problem.”

“Then?”

“Of course, it’s still too early to conclude that the Dark Ages have come again. As I said, Valderas was a descendant of Draconians who originally ruled Jackson. There’s the possibility he was hiding somewhere and attacked Jackson to reclaim it again. However, there is no doubt the situation is more severe than expected.”

Cross and Raymond also exchanged words with grave faces.

“According to the records of our documents, Valderas is said to have strength that rivals the force of a single army division. The renowned Heroes who acted in the Dark Ages lost their lives at his hands.”

“I didn’t think it would end like this...”

“We have no time. The full moon is rising tomorrow.”

“There are still two days before the Kingdom’s reinforcements are expected to arrive, but the castle walls are already too weakened to resist due to the continuous daily

monster attacks. If they come in to attack the castle, Jackson will take irrecoverable damage, even if we are victorious in the battle.”

“We must stop them from reaching the castle at all costs.”

There was no doubt that the parchment heralding Valderas’ appearance was set to announce the final battle. In other words, that meant Valderas was the C++ quest’s final boss!

He would surely be stronger than any boss that Ark had faced before!

“My thoughts exactly, we simply must stop Valderas from arriving here, at all costs. There are two days until the reinforcements arrive, if we can hold him for two days, it will be our victory.”

“Of course. It won’t be an easy battle if the opponent is Valderas, but, thankfully, we have the written instructions brought by Ark, so we know the enemy’s route. Also, one of the scorch cannons has even fallen into our hands. If we mobilize the scorch cannon and all our forces to ambush the route they’re taking, we have a good chance of success.”

The young Lord nodded his head as he grabbed Ark’s hand.

“As you heard, all of this is your accomplishment.”

– By supplying decisive information that will influence the result of the war, your contribution has risen by 3,000.

A very welcome message popped up with cheerful sound effects.

“The upcoming fight will be longer and more dangerous than any of the battles before. However, we can win this fight if we hold on for just two more days. Furthermore, the accursed darkness that has covered Jackson will be lifted as well.” The young Lord spoke with a voice of resolve. “Sir Cross, prepare the necessary supplies at once and discuss the details of the operation.”

“Yes, sir!”

Cross ran out hastily. Then, after about an hour has passed, Raymond announced the Lord’s mobilization order in the square. At the same time, a quest window popped up before every player in Jackson.

Heroes Assembly!

**\*Sub-quest : The Final Battle**

The Lord of Darkness, Valderas, is leading the Demonic Army towards Jackson Castle. If Valderas reaches Jackson, it will receive an irreparable blow. Therefore, the Lord has decided to concentrate all his forces to ambush their movement route in order to stop their advance.

This operation is a general mobilization issued by the Lord's command; all garrisoned players must participate. There are 2 days until the Kingdom's reinforcements arrive—if Valderas' advance is stopped or if he is defeated before then, Jackson's garrison will win. The final battle with Jackson's life on the line is starting now. Raise your swords and defeat the darkness!

(All players participating in this operation will get 50 additional contribution for every monster they kill. All players who participate in damaging or slaying Valderas will get an increase in contribution points. In addition, all players who successfully complete the quest will get a calculated increase in contribution points.)

Difficulty: C++

\* \* \*

It was decided that the operation area would be a valley several kilometers from Jackson Castle. It was good terrain for performing a pincer attack after pushing back the monster army.

The players who had accepted the quest and gathered at the operation area were the combined Platoons 1, 2, and 3, but barely numbering 100. There had been a little over 140 people in the beginning, but while constantly fighting and undertaking Operation Bomb the Scorch Cannons, some 40 people had perished.

In addition, they weren't grouped as one, as they had been before. With their trust towards the central point Alan broken, the players had all split into parties.

It wasn't all Alan's fault that the raid had broken up. This quest gave more contribution points than any before. Also, this was the final battle that marked the finale of the quest. It was now time to get more points than anyone else, rather than staying alive. It was inevitable that they would challenge the operation in parties rather than a raid.

"Each monster gives 50 additional contribution."

"At best, even we might make it into the best 10."

"This is our last chance to turn the tables. No need to pay attention to the others. Since this is the last anyway, take care of the people in our party only."

"Cleric-nim, do not use recovery magic on other parties and save your Mana."

The players were busily whispering amongst themselves in groups of twos and threes.

Ark was busy in his own way because there were more people he had to tend. "Once the battle starts, there won't be time to survey the situation. The ones in the most danger will be the low-level Militia. You earned quite a lot of contribution from the scorch cannon, so you absolutely mustn't be too greedy for contribution. Do you understand? Surviving is most important."

"Yes, understood."

Roco also nodded with a totally nervous expression. With Platoons 1, 2, 3, the Militia, the Jackson Guard, and even the Sylphid Knights, the headcount was nearly 179. In addition, the young Lord was mapping the details of the operation and conveying it to the players. However, it was certain that once the battle broke out, the players would act on their own, blinded by the experience and contribution.

In the end, only you can take responsibility for your own life.

Of course, it was the same for Ark. The only thing he could do for the Militia was to give them food that raised their maximum Health by 300. Once the battle started, he wouldn't have the time or the inclination to help others.

'A battle where you have to improve your results with your ability alone!'

It was actually the situation Ark had hoped for.

"What are you going to do?"

Ark looked at Shambala, who was sitting with a relaxed face.

The promise with Shambala was that he would help until the end of the event quest. But Ark had given him the item he wanted after Operation Bomb the Scorch Cannons had ended. Snake had already thrown up everything within its belly. It was a shame to let the item take up a space in his bag, and Ark had judged that he had done as much work as promised. And also, if he really had to say it, he didn't want to keep Shambala tied down with such terms because he, personally, really liked Shambala. Of course, no matter how much Ark liked him, he hadn't shaved off even 1 Gold from the 300.

"I'm not all that interested in the contribution, but... I'll do it with you. 'Cause it's fun to fight alongside you."

It appeared that Shambala also liked Ark quite a bit.

"It's the Demonic Army!"

Just then, the Magician who had been on watch with Night Vision shouted from one side.

Ark also used Eyes of the Cat as he turned his gaze. A thick swarm of monsters were coming into the valley. Shadows, Avengers, Hiptons... but they were on a completely different level from the monsters they had faced before. Players and NPCs, alike, saw that, while the monsters looked the same, their levels and equipment were all different. The monsters coming into the valley were all draped in durable armor, and they were also twice as large in size.

The faces of the players hardened like stone.

'Level 100 monsters are mixed in too.'

The levels above the monsters' heads were a whopping 90~100!

The players were mostly level 70~80. Only Platoon 1, commanded by Alan, maintained an average level of 80, but even then, they couldn't display 100% of their ability due to the influence of the Dark Fog. On the other hand, the monsters received the darkness attribute bonus, and, considering the levels alone, the difference between the two groups was enormous.

However, Ark's drive was surging up instead. Ark's level had finally reached 75, but calculating in the darkness attribute bonus, his stats were at level 97. There was no difficulty in hunting them even if he didn't make a party.

'Alright, it's worth doing at this level. There isn't even a penalty for not being in the raid. The higher the level, the higher the base contribution points should be. No, let's not worry about other people. My goal is Alan alone. My contribution is still nearly 20,000 away from his. What will determine how much I can reduce that difference in this battle is currently my skill.'

Like a predator watching his prey, Ark gripped his sword as he readied his body. A short while passed, and the Demonic Army had approached until they were right in front. Suddenly, a resonant hoofbeats rang throughout the valley as a group charged towards the Demonic Army. The group shooting forward with their spears erect was Jackson's elite force, the Sylphid Knights.

"It's the decisive moment. FOR JACKSON'S PEACE!"

"WOOAAH, FOR JACKSON'S PEACE!"

"Kekeke? A-ambush!"

"Humans are here, stop them!"

The Shadows at the forefront burst out in shock as they raised their shields. Metallic sounds rang out as spears and shields collided. Taking hits from the accelerated spears, the Shadows went flying everywhere.

They were indeed Jackson Province's ultimate corps, the Sylphid Knights! They fully paraded the skills that had cut off the monster supply route as they went around the province separately during the quest's progression. Once the Sylphid Knights charged, the Demonic Army's formation broke instantaneously.

Cross sprang up as he raised his sword. "Now's the time, attack the flanks!"

"WOOAAH!"

The players hiding in ambush along the flanks of the valley poured out. As players cast their top skills simultaneously, the dark field brightened like daylight. The skills used by the players were mostly offensive skills, but buffs or assisting magic casted by Magicians or Priests were numerous as well. With the effect of the AOE curse skill used by the Demonic Army overlapping on top of that, colorful message windows popped up like crazy before Ark's eyes. There were so many that it was impossible to tell who had used what skill, whether it had applied to him, or if that was a buff or a curse.

But Ark didn't pay any attention to the messages. 'The effect will disappear since the curses and buffs will mostly cancel out anyway. No need to pay attention to other things. No matter how many enemies there are, my opponent is only the one in front of me anyway!'

He didn't even summon Dedric. With countless players around, he had to restrict his skills — there was a great danger of taking an attack from a player who mistook Dedric for a monster. He broke away from the Militia and the Guard too. He had come this far receiving their help out of necessity, but, right now, everyone was a teammate and also competition. In the end, you could only ensure your life with your own skills.

'I'm definitely more comfortable alone. Whether I die or live, it's my responsibility.'

That's right, this was originally Ark's fighting style.

Ark concentrated all his attention on just his sword and the monster before his eyes.

"Kekeke, Human! Die!"

"Shut up and die, DARK BLADE!"

Ark narrowed the gap between them in an instant and struck the throat of the charging Shadow. Unleashing continuous roundhouse kicks at the staggering Shadow, its Health fell by 70% as it collapsed limply. When he loosed another Dark Blade on top of that, the Shadow shrieked as it disappeared.

'I've gotta defeat as many enemies as possible from the start.'

If a drawn-out war began, only the strong monsters would be left. If the players swarmed in then, of course it would become difficult to get points. So he had to secure his contribution by killing even one more monster at the very beginning, even if he had to abuse his Mana.

'Riposte!'

Ark parried the attack flying in at him as he immediately chained with Counter Attack. As the chain skill activated, the Shadow went flying. Thanks to that, three to four monsters all fell over. Ark immediately ran at them and swung his sword left and right.

Po-po-po-pow!

The continuously bursting critical hits!

The Shadows who were wearing plate armor posed no problem for Ark. The weak points revealed by Eyes of the Cat were the joints of the armor, where defense didn't apply! Having reached the peak of accuracy, Ark's sword furrowed into the joints as if being sucked in and dealt critical hits. Wearing the heavy plate armor, the monsters' reaction speed was slow. Also, other status abnormalities registered frequently from his kicks. Moreover, the Dark Blade that occasionally shot out ignored defense altogether. The armor meant nothing to Ark.

His counter attacking strengthened as he blocked the attacks rushing in from all directions. The fighting instinct that he had repressed for a while due to watching out for the Guard and Militia revived. His entire body's senses sharpened as vigor surged forth.

“So you crawled out to die, Human!”

The lizard-riding Avenger’s breastplate sparkled as it thrust its sword. Ark twisted to slide past the sword, then stepped onto the lizard to spring up. Soaring into the sky, Ark’s heel kick plummeted straight down and slammed into the top of the Avenger’s head. Reeling with a stun hex, the Avenger lost its balance and rolled off. The finisher was the Double Critical Chance made possible by its defenseless state!

Ark wasn’t one to miss that chance. His sword slid in between the armor with a metallic hiss, cutting the Avenger’s throat.

Shambala’s skill was so compatible with Ark that it was surprising. When Shambala attracted the enemy’s attention with ‘Blink,’ the rate of hexes with Ark’s kicks increased greatly. Also, since both of them had professions that could use the Backstab effect, monsters fell into critical condition in just three to four hits if they attacked from the back and front.

Even while unleashing a combo attack like that, the two didn’t need words. If Ark moved first, Shambala naturally fell into step with him, and vice versa. That special “something” only two people trained in martial arts could share was between them. They bore down upon the monsters like fish in their element.

However, the overall battle situation was inching towards the Demonic Army, bit by bit. The power balance had tipped because supporting fire from the Mana-depleted Magicians and Archers died down after several minutes of battle, and the Warriors were also collapsing one after another. But there was a greater reason.

‘That bastard Alan...!’

Alan’s party, which was in fact the strongest in the garrison, did not go forward aggressively. Since the beginning of the fight, they posed at the outskirts and were assuming a wait-and-see approach. Even when the party right next to them was annihilated, they simply sat back and watched. Since he wasn’t the commander anymore, his attitude was totally unconcerned.

That attitude of Alan’s suddenly changed when flames filled the valley.

Shhriiieek! BOOOOM!

The black fireball crossed the valley and fell onto the valley. Enormous flames flared as monsters were instantly melted down.

“IT’S THE SCORCH CANNON!”

The tiring players burst out in cheers as they turned their heads.

The scorch cannon stood high on a faraway hill. The scorch cannon had positioned itself and was beginning to let loose supporting fire at last. Finishing its recharging, the scorch cannon spewed flames again. Every time that happened, the Health of the monsters, who were packed in like sardines, plummeted.

Alan's party ran into battle right after that.

"Now's the time, attack! Judgement of the Sacred Earth!"

Charging down the valley, a flashy halo swept out with Alan at the center. AOE magic that dealt Holy damage to all monsters of the darkness attribute!

In a single blow, the scores of monsters with their Health at nearly rock bottom could not endure the ceaseless damage and exploded. It wasn't just Alan. The party members who leapt into battle with him cast AOE skills like crazy with the Mana they had been saving up. 'Arrow Shower,' which poured forth countless arrows like a rain from the Archer, the Magician's 'Inferno' that enveloped a space of 10 meters in flames, the Warrior's 'Shock' that struck a maximum of 8 monsters with the shield in one blow!

All of them were skills that sucked an enormous amount of Mana — their Mana already depleted, the other players could only look on dumbly.

'Alan, you bastard, so you were aiming for this after all.'

Ark ground his teeth with an enraged expression.

The majority of the monsters had lost at least 70% Health from the scorch cannon and the players' attacks. With AOE magic piled onto them layer by layer, there was no way the monsters could withstand it. One AOE magic brought down scores; Alan's party was accumulating an outrageous amount of contribution.

Even after that, the battlefield was dominated by Alan.

'So there's a reason why people followed Alan even while cursing him.'

His first sight of the Holy Knight Alan's fighting really took the cake.

"Immortal Aura!"

As Alan used a Holy Knight exclusive skill, his surroundings were enveloped in white light. It was an aura that reduced the damage his party members took from darkness attribute monsters by 30%. Moreover, though normal Paladins could only

use one aura, the Holy Knight could stack them. Afterwards, Alan used an aura called 'Celestial Light' and Mana recovery speed increased by 30%. As a result, the Mana of Alan's party didn't decrease by much even as they cast skills. Simply being in Alan's party gave you this much of an additional effect. The fact that Platoon 1 players had held the best 10 in contribution all this time was a completely inevitable result. That was why Alan had been able to command the volunteer troops despite the mishaps.

Was that all? Astride a horse, Alan even had mobility. He ran faster than anyone to the place where the scorch cannon had fired and cast his AOE skill. Capable of taking down five Shadows in 2~3 minutes, Ark and Shambala also had an extremely fast hunting speed, but they couldn't compare to Alan, who melted down scores in a single blow.

'Are these the Holy Knight skills I've only heard of?' It felt like a wet blanket was being thrown over his motivation. 'So there was a secret to his 40,000 contribution points. Dammit. If it's like this, it's obvious I can't catch up with him even if I fight to the death. I'm pissed, but only Alan can hunt like that.'

If the Dark Walker was a profession that specialized in soloing and PVP, then the Holy Knight was one that specialized in group battle. With their profession characteristics, there was no way Ark could win against him in a group battle. Moreover, Alan had now broken up the raid and had parted from other players. There was really no reason for him to play the hypocrite and let them secure contribution. Because of that, he indiscriminately strutted around the battlefield as he indifferently fired skills on monsters that another player had reduced to half Health. Even the Shadow that Ark had beaten into critical condition collapsed from one of his AOE skills.

'Dammit, my fighting drive is really being put out.'

"DAMN IT, that's too much!"

"The cheap bastard, coming out like this! Let's go before Alan takes it all!"

The players raged at Alan's outrageousness, but there was no way to stop him. Also, a chance to win the losing battle appeared as a result of Alan's actions, so there was no use cursing him either.

'Still, for Alan to be the one getting the most contribution...'

Right when Ark was bursting in anger—

GRRRR, ROAAAR!

A roar exploded from the rear of the Demonic Army. At the vibrations that shook the area, everyone's attention turned to the direction from whence the sound had come. The monsters that had been pressing in ceaselessly parted to the sides as an enormous monster appeared. A monster, 20 meters in height, with its entire body covered in black flames! The demon was a dragon from the waist down and had the appearance of a human from the torso, which was covered with red armor.

"GRRRRR, LAUGHABLE SCUM. YOU DARE TO BLOCK MY WAY..."

Tongues of black flames flickered out every time he opened his mouth.

A red message popped up before Ark's eyes.

- The boss monster 'Lord of Darkness Valderas' has emerged!

'Valderas! That guy is...!'

Every player halted and stared at Valderas.

"I WILL RECLAIM MY TERRITORY AND DRINK OF YOUR FLESH AND BLOOD!"

An terrible energy befitting of his size poured from his flashing eyes. An overwhelming existence that silenced the battlefield instantaneously! But the emotion that flared into the players' eyes was not just horror. Their happiness was greater instead. A certain number of enemies had to be defeated for Valderas to appear. It meant the quest was entering its final stage.

Now, if they just took down Valderas, the quest that had gone on for 3 days would end. Regardless of their ranking, the people who survived until the final battle had accumulated a lot of contribution points' if they just defeated Valderas, they would be rewarded for their 3 days of effort.

"You get contribution points just from hitting Valderas!"

"Let's defeat Valderas and finish the quest!"

"Concentrated attack!"

People pressed forward like a swarm of bees.

"That bastard is the evil that threw Jackson Castle into despair!"

The Sylphid Knights and the Guard also raised their long swords high as they charged. Countless magic strikes and arrows bombarded him and Warriors surrounded Valderas, swinging their swords.

But Valderas was ridiculously strong. Even after taking countless attacks, there wasn't even a sign that his Health had dropped at all. Enveloped in black flames, even curse magic didn't work on Valderas.

"FLIES!"

Valderas swung an enormous iron mace. The durability of steel shields became 0 in an instant and broke. The Warriors who lost their shields were hit by the iron mace and were flung away. Ark used that chance to approach Valderas' rear and thrust with his sword. Contribution would be awarded if he just dealt damage. He couldn't just sit around and watch.

"Dark Blade!"

A Backstab and a critical hit ignoring defense! But Valderas didn't even turn his head. It wasn't even an attack worth his attention. Rather, the black flames encircling Valderas dealt Ark damage when he successfully attacked.

– You have taken 100 damage from Valderas' 'Bastion of Corrupt Flames.'

– You have caught a 'Burn' and will take 10 damage every 10 seconds for 1 minute.

"Holy shit!"

It meant he would take 160 damage every time he unleashed an attack. To say that contribution points would be given every time you damaged Valderas, it seemed there was no such thing as free in the world after all.

"GRRRR, DID YOU BLOCK MY WAY WITH SKILLS AMOUNTING TO JUST THIS?"

Valderas swung his iron mace like a windmill.

A gale was swept up as Valderas dealt enormous damage to all the players surrounding him. But, the attack did not end there. Then Valderas opened his maw wide and black flames spewed out. The special skill of the Draconics, Breath!

Four Warriors who were reduced to just 50% Health from the horrible AOE attack fell over without even a chance to pull out recovery potions. If they were level 70~80 Warriors, their Health should be at least 1,000 at 50%. Moreover, they were wrapped up in plate armor so their defense should be over 200. Even so, they couldn't take two hits and collapsed. Ark had rapidly unleashed evasive maneuvers but he also took considerable damage. When the Warriors fell over limply, the morale of the players plummeted.

"Damn, how the fuck are we supposed to win against a demon like this?"

"Recovery magic can't even keep up with the damage we're getting while attacking!"

"But the Magicians and Warriors have it better! Our arrows aren't even hitting him altogether!"

But there was one, sole exception.

"Holy Sword!"

Alan ran in as he swung his flashing sword. As he struck the demon with the sparkling sword, Valderas seemed to take quite a shock as his Health decreased noticeably. Alan cast Holy Sword onto all of his party members and lashed out at Valderas.

Once Holy Sword was used, Valderas' auto counter skill was nulled, too.

"A Holy Knight indeed!"

"Dammit, I should've joined Alan's party after all."

"But there's a way to block that auto counter!"

The Magicians cast Water magic all at once. If Water offensive spells were used against the flame shielded Valderas, he took damage, as slight as it was. And if Water magic was cast onto a sword, they found out that the flame counter was nulled. But most of the Magicians were out of Mana and couldn't grant that magic effect to more than a few people.

'Dammit, to think that I have to sit and watch, leaving that lump of experience and contribution...'

Having to watch Alan excitedly attack Valderas, Ark's insides burned. Moreover, he even had to watch Platoon 1 and Andel raise their contribution, so his innards were about to turn to ashes. But, there was no other way.

A formation where Alan's party and the few high-leveled players with the magic effect besieged Valderas and the rest of the players blocked the minions pressing in from their surroundings was naturally formed. Like it or not, they could only help Alan since the quest had to be defeated first.

"anyway, there's a chance to win!"

"If we have Alan and the scorch cannon, we might even be able to win!"

After several minutes passed, Valderas's Health fell to about 50%. No matter how impressive a boss he was, he couldn't withstand more than 30 players gulping down recovery potions like water as they attacked like crazy.

At last, the scorch cannon's recharging was finished as well. A laser-like light extended from the scorch cannon and took aim on Valderas, the players backed away like an ebbing tide. Simultaneously, the fireball flew through the air and landed a direct hit on Valderas.

BOOOOM!

"Good shot!"

"It may be a boss monster, but it should've taken a lot of damage!"

The players shouted with excited voices. But the sight of Valderas that emerged afterwards made their faces pale.

"H-how could this be—!"

"Didn't he recover Health instead?!"

Surprisingly enough, Valderas' Health had recovered to 70% again.

"N-no way, can he even *absorb* flame damage?"

They realize too late. The black flames enveloping his body even stronger than before, Valderas smiled faintly.

"GRRR, YOU ROTTEN HUMANS! AURA OF BLACK FLAME!"

– Valderas has used 'Aura of Black Flame.'
--

All monsters within 100 meters of Valderas will receive the 'Bastion of Black Flame.'
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All the monsters pressing in around them were wrapped in black flames, like Valderas.

“Dammit, fucking ridiculous! All the monsters have the Bastion of Black Flame?!”

“Now we can’t even use the scorch cannon!”

Even though it was useless against Valderas, the scorch cannon had been protecting the players from the Demonic Army onward. It was thanks to the scorch cannon that Alan’s party was able to focus on Valderas. But if all the monsters received the protection of flames, the scorch cannon would really be rendered useless. There was no way the players could block the Demonic Army since they took damage with every attack.

“BURN IN THE FIRES OF HELL, HUMANS! FLAME RAGE!”

Valderas jeered at the shocked people yet again as he used a skill. The entire valley shook as if there was an earthquake as the ground split right open. Then, hundreds of flames surged from the rift and exploded when they collided with players. The flames flying around were the size of tennis balls. They weren’t so fast that body motions polished in the heat of battle couldn’t avoid them, but it was almost impossible for ordinary players to avoid flames of this speed. There was nothing more to be said about the Warriors wearing heavy plate armor. The low-leveled Militia group took even more severe damage. Roco took a hit from the flames right off the bat, and JusticeMan was helping another person when he collapsed from a hit to his back. Players at level 80 lost 30% of their Health in a single blow. Of course the level 30~40 Militia would perish with one hit.

There was nothing Ark could do, even as he watched them fall.

‘Dammit, something like this—!’

The defensive formation collapsed in an instant. The Demonic Army or Valderas were no longer the problem anymore.

“RETREAT, ALL HANDS RETREAT!”

They heard Cross’ scream from afar. He had ultimately judged that the damage would only worsen in their current state. But even retreat was already impossible. They had made a circular formation in order to pour concentrated fire onto Valderas and were buried within hundreds of Demonic Army monsters. As they watched their teammates falling over one by one, the same message popped up before every player.

Annihilation and quest failure!

'No fucking way. There's no way to win with Valderas having 100% resistance to fire!'

Ark dodged the successive balls of flame as he clenched his teeth.

'That 100% fire resistance, it's an option attached to a Legendary item. If it's not an item, then that resistance can only be defeated in the underwater world. Flames would be no good there, but here...'

It was then. Ark recalled the map that had been attached to the written instructions.

'That's right. Up this valley, there is...!'

Ark summoned Dedric as he rolled on the ground.

"Dedric, fly! Raymond is controlling the scorch cannon. Go to Raymond and tell him to smash a fireball into the river bank!"

"What? What the hell?"

"Shut up and just do as I say! There's no time!"

As Ark screamed, Dedric floundered as he flew to the scorch cannon.

And then several minutes later, when half of the forces had fallen from Valderas and the Demonic Army's flaming attacks, the scorch cannon suddenly rotated towards the North. Then a roar sounded as a fireball shot out.

Watching the fireball disappear into the darkness, Ark's eyes flashed.

'It's a success. Now we just have to hold on!'

And, a short while afterwards, he felt a vibration at the bottom his feet. At first it was a barely noticeable, small vibration, but it soon became violent enough to make his body shake. Ark dodged the flying flames as he opened his bag.

"Sharkman's Shackles!" Ark rapidly changed his shoes and shouted at Shambala. "Shambala, grab onto me!"

"What?"

Slipping past flames with qigong, Shambala spoke incredulously. The vibrations seemed to grow stronger, then suddenly, a roar burst from up the valley with a rumble.

ROOOAAR, CRAASH!

“Water? How?”

Players, NPCs, and even Valderas and the monsters all halted and burst out in astonishment. An enormous amount of water shook the earth as it rushed in. Located up the valley was the river where the steel-armored merchant ship sent by the Merchant Guild had sank. Having confirmed on the map that came with the written instructions, Ark had blown up the bank between the valley and the riverside with a fireball. Of course, the overflowing river water followed the slope and rushed down into the valley at an enormous speed.

‘If this isn’t underwater, then all I have to do is make it underwater!’

The enormous water attack rushed in, uprooting rocks and trees!

Naturally, you would take enormous damage if hit head on. Players paled immediately as they fled in every direction. Then Ark spotted Andel among the panicked players. For a moment, a wicked gleam flashed from Ark’s eyes.

‘Andel! It seems your fate is to die at my hands after all!’

“Snake, I have a request. Do you think you can move?”

The limp Snake raised its head high and nodded.

“Even if it’s hard, suffer just this once. That bastard is an enemy who messed with me many times. No matter what you have to do, tie up his legs so he can’t run away!”

Hiss, hiss!

At the mention that he was Ark’s enemy, Snake hissed sharply as it dropped from Ark’s waist. Then it nimbly crawled on the ground and wrapped itself around Andel’s legs. At this totally unexpected attack, Andel fell flat on his face. Then he stared at Snake with flummoxed eyes and discovered Ark too late.

“Y-you bastard, what have you done...!”

“Who’s the one who said wait and see?”

“You’re gonna try to do something to me with a snake like this?”

Andel scowled as he raised his sword.

“Too late.”

Then as Ark murmured with an evil smile, the torrent filled the valley with a fierce roar. The torrent alone didn't damage the players, but the rocks and trees dragged in with the wave were different. The writhing Andel took a hit to the head from a large boulder and lost 70% of his Health. Snake took damage at the same time and was forcefully recalled, but Snake's Health was just 50, and thus, Ark only received 25 damage.

“Arghhh, d-damn it!! YOU, I'LL KILL YOU!”

Andel screamed as he was carried down with the torrent.

“Don't make me laugh. I wouldn't have even messed with you if I was gonna end it here.”

Thanks to wearing the Sharkman's Shackles, the torrent didn't affect Ark at all. And, if he wasn't affected by the torrent, simply avoiding the rocks and trees rushing in was no problem. But Ark ran towards a boulder that was quickly approaching.

‘Riposte!’

Ark parried the rock with his chain skill. In that moment, the rock was flung away with a heavy clang.

“AGH! W-what...!”

Andel's face drained of color. The rock Ark had pushed away with his chain skill, was shooting straight towards him like an arrow. Andel urgently raised his shield, but there was no way he could make proper defensive movements while being tossed around by the torrent.

CRUNCH!

With the sound of something being crushed, Andel's face crumpled in. And then he dropped the sword he was holding as he disappeared, swept up by the rapids. Ark had killed him, but there was no reason for him to become Chaotic since he hadn't attacked Andel directly.

“I'll let you off this time with this. But the next time you show up in front of me, I'll definitely make your stats 0.”

Ark grinned as he picked up the sword.

While Ark was taking his petty revenge, the deluge had completely engulfed the valley.

Encircled in flames, Valderas and the monsters that had gained the fire attribute were swept away by the rapids; steam whooshed out with the clamorous sound of water meeting hot metal. As a result, the valley was shrouded in fog made from the steam.

Water. It was Ark's world once again.

## **Act 7 : The Underwater Master**

CRAAASH!

The violent current struck Valderas and his Demonic Army. The Demonic Army, and even Valderas, couldn't resist and were swept away by the current. There was nothing more to be said about the players. The frantically running users went flying in the torrent like leaves in a storm. Several perished after taking a hit from a rock or tree. However, despite taking the rapids head-on, Ark was perfectly fine. This was thanks to the Sharkman's Shackles, which nulled environmental effects.

'It's just as I expected!'

Swept into the current, the Bastion of Flame protecting Valderas and the Demonic Army completely disappeared. What's more, the monsters crashing into the water took enormous damage. However, those effects were only an extra. Ark's true goal was the underwater penalty on the monsters. Ark had already experienced the terror of the water penalty. Nature's environmental penalty, which made one unable to move properly, let alone attack or defend!

The environmental penalty applied to monsters as well. Moreover, since the monsters were wearing plate armor, the penalty would be many times worse. Indeed, even after the torrent subsided, the monsters couldn't regain their balance and flailed around. In other words, like blind fishes!

"Just what did you...!"

Shambala shouted with an aghast voice as he gushed out air bubbles. Ark pulled out a Mermaid Scale, flicked it over to him, and grinned.

"You'll get it once you see it from here on out, though only if you can follow me."

Ark changed his shoes and armor into the Norad Boots, which raised movement speed and evasion rate, and the water penalty nulling Guardian Armor of the Merpeople. Then the weight pressing down his body completely disappeared. Though he was underwater, his movements were natural, as if he was running around on the plains.

“Alright, shall we begin? Eyes of the Cat!”

Having stretched his joints with cracking noises, Ark ran towards the floundering monsters.

“Just who the hell is this dude? And what’s with this scale?” With a dumb look, Shambala stared at Ark’s back as he ran like the wind.

Ark ran in the water.

Po-po-po-pow!

The Health of the monsters Ark grazed past plummeted in an instant.

He didn’t even see the monsters flailing around as enemies anymore. Underwater, level or numbers had no meaning. Though it hadn’t been easy to face even just five monsters only a short while ago, the situation was different now. Even if he was surrounded by twenty to thirty monsters, he was confident he could clear them away in a minute. Having previously received the Bastion of Flame, the monsters took a huge hit to their Health from being submerged. But more than that, what applied most right now was that this place was now underwater!

The water penalty was fatal to those who had never experienced it. When Ark had first gone underwater, he had nearly died several times from monsters 10 levels lower than him. But, he overcame all the difficulties and mastered underwater fighting.

Was that all? Right now, the Guardian Armor of the Merpeople was nullifying the underwater penalty altogether. To Ark, the likes of the floundering monsters were no different from newborn babes. Ark could only see the Shadows, Avengers, and even the Hiptons as experience and contribution. An absolute situation created by the combination of the environmental effect and items!

‘This is my world!’

Looking around, the surviving players were waging fierce battle with the monsters pressing in. Although it was a fight that would give one sweaty palms in its own way, it was an absolute comedy to Ark.

A Warrior lost his balance while swinging his sword, causing him to spin around and around, and a stupid Magician thoughtlessly used lighting magic and ended up damaging himself with the sparks. At least the situation for the Warriors was a little better. Thanks to their heavy plate armor, they sank to the bottom and were able to get their footing. But the Magicians and Archers floating in the water ended up taking concentrated attacks from the monsters pressing in from all directions.

Whenever he saw a player like that, Ark rushed in, killed the monsters, and then calmly disappeared. He wasn't trying to save them, it was just because it would be a shame to waste the monster's EXP.

'This is really a cakewalk!'

Experience and contribution were floating about in the water. All Ark had to do was run around in the water and gobble them up. Where could one find something more exciting than this?

But it wasn't all enjoyable. The countless japtem floating around with the corpses! Snake had disappeared and his bag was full; since he had to leave behind all those items, his tears hindered his vision. He didn't even have bag room for the sword Andel had dropped so he was forced to go around carrying it.

Suddenly having to carry a sword in both hands, his movements weren't as agile as before. His center of balance had changed subtly so the actions he had become used to all this time didn't connect like he wanted. But it was one more precious item he had picked up. Even if he died he had absolutely no thought of dropping the weapon that fell into his hands. Also, this was underwater; his actions being slowed down was no threat against the monsters receiving the enormous penalty.

- You have dealt a critical hit.

Whenever Ark swung his sword, a critical hit burst out along with a shriek.

That was because the evasion rate of the monsters was at rock bottom due to being underwater. Kicks were also the same. Each time he kicked, a monster would lose its balance and go flying. Nevermind counter attacking, simply swimming back to Ark took a long time. Killing monsters like nothing.

Even without the Guardian Armor of the Merpeople, Ark was one who had dodged the countless tentacles of the Jellyfish, and had stabbed his sword into the pin-sized gap in a Crab's joints. He could deal critical hits on the monsters going in slow motion with his eyes closed. Moreover, with monsters down to 30-40% Health, it wasn't a battle but a slaughter.

Every monster that moved disappeared, as if melted away by Ark. Many monsters appeared even after that, but there were none that could keep up with Ark's movements.

"Kekeke, that Human, how can he move this fast?"

"Ack! H-he's strong!"

The monsters' words were their last. It was literally a full-blown sweep!

'I want to clear away all the monsters if I can, but...' Ark sighed in regret.

The countless EXP and contribution lying around him! Ark could hog it all if he just put his mind to it. Unfortunately, he didn't have enough time for that.

Many monsters were already fleeing out of the water. Of course, the surviving players would take down those monsters on their own. But if Valderas left the water, there was no knowing how the situation would change. If Valderas got out of the water and regained his strength, the method to complete the quest would disappear. In other words, no matter how much contribution he accumulated, he wouldn't be able to receive a reward.

'I've got to win while he's underwater!'

Ark ran in the murky water as he chased after Valderas' trail.

'There's no time! Where is he? How far was he swept away?'

Ark dashed all the way downstream like that while annihilating the monsters pressing in.

Thump, thump, thump.

Just then, tremors suddenly arose underwater. He looked in their direction and glimpsed the sight of an enormous shadow moving heavily in the murky water. A demon with a dragon's body and the upper torso of a Shadow!

'Valderas!'

The final boss monster that dozens hadn't been able to defeat even after bombarding him! But the situation was different now. Valderas only had 40% Health left. The 70% Health had been cut down by 30% after being swept by the torrent. It did seem that the stronger the flame power, more damage it took from water. In addition, unlike the monsters that had been granted the Bastion of Flame for a set period of

time, Valderas' attribute was originally fire. He was taking steady damage as the intense reaction of the flames and water erupted around his body.

'Now's the time. If I miss him here, there won't be a second chance!'

"Valderas, I'm not going to lose you!"

Ark blocked Valderas' way. Valderas spat out a savage cry as he swung his iron mace.

"FUCK OFF, *HUMAN*—!"

But the force of the mace was not the same as before. The attack was as slow as a fly coming down to rest, and there were no fearsome black flames. It wasn't hard to evade. But Ark resolved himself to take the damage, parried, and counter attacked.

'Riposte!'

— You have dealt a critical hit!

As the chain skill burst out, Valderas was knocked back. He had gone out of his way to use Riposte in order to push Valderas into a deeper place so he couldn't escape.

Originally, Riposte could only knock back monsters up to the medium size; large monsters had weight to them so the knock back effect activation rate was very low. But this was underwater, so Valderas' size or weight were of no concern when the monster couldn't even gain its center of balance.

'As expected! This guy is no different from a regular monster now!'

He was certain of it after one blow. The fire attributed Valderas was extremely weakened. Also, the flame skills that had made Valderas invincible were all sealed. Lastly, with the Bastion of Flame gone, the damage went through properly. He had so much Health that even a critical hit only shaved away only 0.1%, but it was huge progress compared to when there had been no effect at all.

'I can win. I can fight him on my own.'

After having unsummoned Dedric, Ark resummoned him again.

Dedric, who had flown to the scorch cannon, appeared in front of his nose with a frightened expression.

"Master! Ack, this guy... isn't he Valderas?"

"Dedric, don't talk back and attract his attention!" Ark ordered as he handed over a Mermaid Scale.

"Uhuhuhu, you fat bastard! Playing around with something of your level is no problem if we're underwater!"

It seemed Dedric also took the struggling Valderas lightly. Dedric immediately showed off the underwater skills he had learned in the sea as he started to harass Valderas.

"THE LIKES OF A HUMAN WOULD DARE TO STAND AGAINST ME, A DRACONIAN WARRIOR, ALONE?!"

"You haven't grasped the situation yet? I'm the one who threw you underwater. Why do you think I did that?"

"WHAT?"

"You stupid lizard, it's because you're no match for me here."

"Y-YOU DARE TO INSULT ME!"

Valderas shrieked in rage as he went crazy. But the more he did so, the further he fell into Ark's pace. Even if he didn't use Eyes of the Cat, he could see numerous weak points in a glance. Ark's sword didn't go off by even a hair's breadth and accurately thrust into the weak points.

BOOOM!

Even against a boss monster, he dealt critical hits at a rate of 70%.

Ark, who didn't receive underwater penalty, could also kick without any problems. When Valderas wavered even a little, he let loose a barrage of kicks. Beaten like crazy with his Health being shaved away, even Valderas seemed to start to feel a little fear. He used all his strength to try and get out of the water by swinging his iron mace. But the fight became even easier as Valderas panicked and swung the mace around. Ark rammed all the mace strikes with Riposte and Valderas was actually pushed into a deeper place.

"ARRGHH, TH-THIS BASTARD!"

Valderas' Health began to hit the ground under the shallow attacks of the Critical Hits, Counter Attacks, and kicks.

However, it wasn't as if Ark didn't take any damage. Although he didn't have to worry about the Bastion of Flame, the monsters in the area gathered to protect the boss. Though they were just weak monsters taking the underwater penalty, it was impossible to dodge all the attacks pouring in from dozens of monsters. Even worse, he had to keep using Riposte in order to keep Valderas from escaping, so he had to take some damage. Also, even if he successfully dodged, it didn't completely nullify the damage. 90% of the damage was reduced with a perfect dodge, so if he dodged ten attacks, it was the same as getting hit once. The damage was even greater if he defended with Parry. When Ark blocked Valderas' attack with a parry in order to use Riposte, he lost 200 Health in an instant.

'However, I can control Parry. I can just use it appropriately while checking my Health. Also, the Shadows' attacks won't be a problem if I occasionally take care of them as I drink recovery potions.'

He had diligently saved up the recovery potions he'd gotten at the start of the event quest and the potions he'd picked up while doing the quest. He had a whopping 7 Intermediate Recovery Potions which recovered 300 Health each! He could recover 2,100 Health at any time. The slowed monsters' attacks wouldn't be able to hinder him from drinking the potions.

'I can win! I can beat him!'

Ark was confident of his victory.

Then, the fog that had filled the valley slowly disappeared. Only then were the people who had narrowly escaped from the water able to see Valderas. It was hard to see properly with the fire and water reaction constantly spewing steam around Valderas, but they could at least tell that he was fighting someone underwater—with unbelievable movements.

"It's Valderas!"

"He's fighting with someone!"

"Who is it? Is someone fighting Valderas alone?"

"Damn, just look at those movements! How is he moving like that underwater?"

"I was only barely able to get out of the water..."

"Is it Alan?"

"No, I saw Alan gasping while swimming in the opposite direction earlier."

As they watched Ark, who was going head to head with Valderas, the players shouted.

“Lo-look at that! Valderas only has 20% Health left!”

“He could really win!”

“This is no time to be dallying around! Let’s attack too!”

The Magicians, Archers, and Clerics started shooting concentrated fire at Valderas.

“YOU FLIES!”

Valderas leapt up, extended his head, and shot a fireball. The Magicians hurriedly put up a shield, but the fireball erupted as it blew the shield to bits. Five to six players went forward needlessly, took massive damage, and were forcefully logged out.

Valderas was as scary as ever, but his opponent, Ark, was not outside of the water, but inside.

“Your opponent is me. Valderas!” Ark shouted as he struck Valderas’ leg.

“AUGH, YOU ANNOYING BASTARD!”

Valderas leapt up again and spewed a fireball down below. As the fireball shot into the water, a column of steam erupted up and draped the surroundings in dense fog again.

Ark quickly rotated his body as he dodged the attack. Even though it was a fireball of enormous force, he didn’t take any damage in the explosion underwater. In other words, he just had to avoid a direct hit! Having dodged the fireball, Ark unleashed a barrage of successive kicks!

Boom, boom, boom, boom!

The surface of the water shook as roars erupted.

Then, when about 20 minutes had passed, Valderas, who had felt invincible, fell to below 10% Health and dropped into critical condition. On the other hand, Ark had 40% Health left and also had 4 Intermediate Recovery Potions remaining.

‘I’ve won!’

Ark made a triumphant expression.

Pushing him back into the water with the chain skill, Valderas' Health fell to 5% under the focused assault. That instant, Valderas suddenly roared and violently smashed the ground with his iron mace. Ark, who had been raining attacks, flinched and took a step back. From his experience, most bosses had their own killer move. They would activate their killer move when their Health fell to a certain level. Indeed, the atmosphere was grave.

Valderas' body suddenly turned black as the water around him began to boil.

"IMPUDENT HUMAN! FINE. I SHALL ACKNOWLEDGE YOU. YOU ARE STRONG. HOWEVER, EVEN YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO TAKE DOWN ME IN THE END. BY MY HONOR, I SWEAR BY THE NAME OF SLAUGHTER THAT I WILL DRAG YOU AND ALL THE HUMANS HERE DOWN TO HELL WITH ME. RAAAH, POWER OF DESTRUCTION!"

At the same time, a red message popped up in front of Ark.

The Lord of Darkness Valderas has activated the skill 'Curse of Black Flames!'

Curse of Flames: A curse skill that automatically activates as soon as Valderas' Health goes below 5%. When 'Curse of Black Flames' is activated, Valderas will become unable to perform any actions. In exchange, his physical defense and magic resistance are both increased by 100%. When the curse is complete, Valderas will self destruct and all living beings within a 1 kilometer radius will receive 5,000 explosive damage regardless of defense or magic resistance.

Remaining time: 30 seconds

Ark's face went pale.

29 seconds, 28 seconds ...

Time passed even as he checked the message.

The message Ark had just checked was received by all the players in the blast radius. They had just been waiting for Valderas to fall as they stared at the surface of the water with bated breaths. And surprisingly enough, their wish was becoming reality. But what kind of absurd skill is this, all of a sudden?!

There was no one here who had more than 5,000 Health. Even the highest leveled Warrior didn't even reach 3,000. It would be no use even if they gulped down recovery potions like crazy. Once the skill was complete, they would definitely die! Jackson Territory would become peaceful again as a result, but the annihilated players would see the quest failure message.

“We, we have to bring him down before that with concentrated fire!”

The players poured in attacks like crazy at the surface of the water, where steam was spewing out. But with his defense increased by 100% with the activation of the skill, there was no sign of Valderas' Health falling. In addition, the surface was so clogged up with steam that they couldn't even aim properly.

“NO WAY!”

“Damn it, let's run away!”

Too late, the players turned and ran. But in the remaining time of 20 seconds; it was impossible even for Magicians, who could use speed spells, to run 1 kilometer in 20 seconds.

And like them, Ark couldn't escape either.

‘Damn, have I really come so far only to die like this?’

How far could he get when he was right in front of Valderas' nose?

Only way to live was to take down Valderas within the time limit, but he was already out of Mana. He couldn't even use Dark Blade, which was the only move he had that could ignore defense.

10 seconds, 9 seconds...

Even while he was thinking, the timer went down in front of his eyes.

“Unsummon, unsummon me! I don't need to die with you! I don't wanna die anymoreeeee!” Shouted the panicking Dedric as he held onto Ark.

‘That's right!’

At that moment, a thought flashed into Ark's head.

He thought of the scene when Dedric had last died. The battle with Adelaine in Gallic's belly! Back then, Ark had taken down Adelaine and a Rare item fell into his hands.

“Adelaine's Necklace!”

Ark quickly backed away and took out Adelaine's Necklace. He had gotten the level 70 restricted accessory at level 64, so he had packed it away and had forgotten it. But

he remembered it thanks to Dedric. And Ark's level was now 75! He had long since passed the level needed to use the necklace.

Ark shouted while equipping the necklace, "Blessing of the Sea Spirit!"

A blue kernel flowed from the pearl and transformed into the form of a beautiful Mermaid. It was the lover of Hero Maban, who had been purified by Ark; the former Queen of the Merpeople, Adelaine.

Adelaine smiled warmly as she looked at Ark. Then she approached him like a spring breeze and lightly kissed him.

Only usable once a day, the special effect of the necklace, Blessing of the Sea Spirit, was invoked!

A 40% increase in defense and 500 Mana recovery!

'This is my last chance!'

Ark's mind ran at a tremendous speed. Now the remaining time was just 5 seconds. He had to kill Valderas within that time!

'I can use Dark Blade five times in 5 seconds. But then I'll be forced to give up on this adventure!'

Ark raised the sword he had pinched from Anel. He hadn't even had time to check it properly. But since it was from Anel, who drank recovery potions like water, it was a Magic item at the very least.

Since he had to break it, tears sprang to his eyes.

But he had no choice. It wasn't like he could break Lancel's Sword just because it was a shame to lose Anel's. Ark switched Anel's sword to his right hand and activated the skill with all his might.

"Blade Storm!"

The killer move of a Dark Walker that consumed an enormous 400 Mana! He had never been able to use the skill because of his lack of Mana and the penalty of having to destroy a sword. Of course, there was no knowing what kind of effect would come out of it, but all he could do right now was to hope it could produce a mighty attack worth 400 Mana and the loss of one sword.

As soon as Ark used the skill, cracks spread like a spider web over the blade. Then, with a flash, the sword broke into shards and raised a vortex.

...Suddenly, all the sound around him disappeared.

In a space of complete silence that blocked the sounds from outside, the shattered sword fragments serenely embroidered the darkness like the Milky Way.

And then, they gathered in one place and shot out in all directions with a tremendous explosion.

BOOOOOOOM!

You have used the skill 'Blade Storm.'

The opponent will take 5 unavoidable damage per sword shard. Depending on the sword's performance and the proficiency of the skill, the sword will break into smaller shards and tear the opponent apart.

5 damage for every shard!

In a glance, there looked to be hundreds of shards, and each did 5 damage.

Its power was beyond imagination. As each of the sand-like shards stabbed into Valderas' body, his Health quickly fell from 5% to 0.5% in an instant. Even with his defense raised to 100%, Valderas couldn't handle the enormous damage and dropped to one knee. Valderas' body turned crimson.

Double Critical Chance!

'Now!'

There was only one second remaining, and Ark had 120 Mana left. There was only one skill Ark could believe in and use in the final moment.

"Dedric, this is the final blow. DARK BLADE!"

Ark swung up Lancel's Sword high and brought it down.

- You have dealt double the critical hit with Double Critical Chance. You have dealt a 150% damage critical hit that ignores defense with Dark Blade. 40% damage has been added as a co-op bonus of the magic sword owner Dedric.

- The 'Curse of Black Flames' skill has been cancelled.

As three effects activated at the same time, the curse skill disappeared. At last, Valderas' Health also hit the ground.

'Huff huff huff, I, I made it.'

"HUK! BY A HUMAN, I... IM-IMPOSSIBLE. IMPOSS... KEEUK, KUAAAK!"

Valderas stuttered with an agonized face, and then abruptly screamed towards the sky. Jet black energy swirled from his mouth as it gushed and began to rise. After expelling the black energy for some time, Valderas collapsed, as if completely spent. But even that was for a moment — he suddenly flung his head up.

'Damn, is he still alive?'

Startled, Ark took a step back.

Luckily, there was no hostility in Valderas' face. The grey eyes that had emitted foreboding energy had turned to a red as transparent as rubies. After looking around himself like a person who had just woken up, Valderas blew out a long sigh.

"Stranger... thank you..."

"What?"

As Ark replied with a puzzled expression, Valderas spoke with a guilty face.

"I am Valderas... a Warrior with... the blood of the great Fire Draconians. Long ago... when a great evil covered the world... I led the nobles to... protect Jackson Territory... and fought the evil... but the evil was... stronger than I expected. I was drawn by the darkness' seduction... and walked the path of corruption... and met a dishonorable death at the... hands of Warriors."

"You died?"

"Yes. I died... even after dying once in the past... I could not... break free from the power of darkness... Rather, my fetters became even stronger.. But your sword... freed me from my chains... How such a thing was possible... even I cannot understand... But I am truly thankful... your sword that drove away... the darkness... has saved the Jackson Territory... I loved."

Valderas gazed at him profoundly before shaking his head.

"There's no need... to pity me."

Of course, he had no thoughts of sympathy. Honestly, he was just scared. Therefore, it would be nice if he would just quietly die already. Ark swallowed the words on his throat.

“You are... similar to someone I knew... like he who loved the darkness... even as he hated it... Warrior... I will warn you for your sake... your strength, that freed me from the darkness... it will be a great threat to the darkness... if I, who fell into darkness, woke again... the darkness that should have disappeared long ago may... awaken again... Stranger... become stronger... The darkness... is strong.”

With that being the last of his super awkward words, Valderas slowly disappeared. Once Valderas faded away, the Shadows in the vicinity also disappeared, as though it melted down.

– You have leveled up.

Successive messages popped up as he rose 3 levels.

“I, I did it!”

Ark had miraculously killed Valderas at last. It was thanks to the item he had remembered in the last moment, Adelaine’s Necklace. Through Adelaine’s help, he was able to use Blade Storm, which he had never been able to use because he lacked Mana. This victory was perhaps a miracle created by Adelaine’s feelings towards Hero Maban. After thinking that, he crinkled his nose.

However, emotions were emotions, and reality was reality.

‘Huhuhu, I should grab the items before the other people crawl over.’

Fortunately, there was no one nearby. They had all fled, terrified by Valderas’ suicide skill. Granted, no one who would object to Ark getting the items anyways. However, it was a rule that one should pick up items without others knowing.

Valderas, the boss of the event quest only a handful out of hundreds of players had survived! He was a boss Ark had narrowly managed to kill after overcoming several near death instances.

Naturally, a reward worth it all would follow.

Fire Slayer (Unique)			
Weapon Type	Blunt Weapon		
Attack Damage	50~70	Durability	210/350
Weight	70	Usage Restriction	Level 80, 300 Strength
The iron mace used by the Lord of Darkness Valderas. A powerful magic			

mace made by smelting the magma of Mt. Lava, the origin of the Fire Draconians, it boasts the mighty power to destroy the opponent's defense in an instant. In addition, it is imbued with the strength of Valderas' powerful flames.

Options: +20% Armor Destruction, Fire Damage +10

Special Option: Can use a 200 damage mini fireball (range 10 meters) three times a day.

'A Unique weapon...'

Ark's jaw dropped. It may be a Warrior-only weapon, but it had a whopping damage of 50~70! It was *double* the attack of Lancel's Sword. In addition, the fire attribute did 10 damage! Even the special option was outrageous.

A Unique weapon of this level was hard to even find in the auctions. It even had a distinctive appearance, so there was no doubt that it would be extremely popular with item collectors.

'I was worried since my bank account is running low because I've used all my money for this month...'

It was worth the trouble. Did people call this a welcome rain at the end of a drought? After changing his job to a pro gamer, he had been very anxious because he hadn't gotten a decent item. But to think such an incredible item would come into his hands in the event quest!

'He really lives up to his name as the Lord of Darkness!'

2 items had dropped besides the weapon.

Fire Draconian Scale (Material)

A scale of the Fire Draconians that ruled the northern continent long ago. Made from sturdy keratin, the scale faintly retains its surface sheen; a holy energy of flame is flowing from it. If processed by an outstanding craftsman, a leather product imbued with powerful magic can be made.

Lord of Darkness Valderas' Insignia: Starting item for a level 150 quest.

You need 100 Knowledge of Ancient Relics to identify this item.

The scale had quite a grandiose explanation, but it didn't look like it could make money right away. He was more interested in the quest starting item. Just looking at the Jeweled Hand Mirror's case, one could expect a big reward for that kind of quest. But the level requirement was 150, and he needed 100 Knowledge of Ancient Relics. It was still a quest he couldn't do until the far future.

Before anyone could see, Ark hurriedly threw away cheap items in his bag and stowed the loot.

Just then, a ray of sunlight suddenly shone from above the surface. Lifting his head, he saw the Dark Fog that had covered Jackson gradually fading, revealing the blue sky.

Only after staring up at the brightening sky through the water was Ark able to realize the quest was over. Indeed, the quest was updated with a sound effect afterwaters.

Hero Assembly!
* The sub-quest 'Stop Valderas' Advance' has been completed. Through the efforts of Warriors who gathered from various places, the Lord of Darkness Valderas was defeated. The Dark Fog covering Jackson Territory has also disappeared; the time of terror is now over.
The Warriors who survived to the very end and saved Jackson will be granted great honor and Fame. In addition, they will receive a reward if they take their Badge to the Giran Magic Institute.
* You have made a chief contribution in defeating Valderas.
Additional reward: +20,000 contribution points. +200 Fame
All missions have succeeded; 'Hero Assembly (Event Quest)' has been completed.
With the completion of the main quest, all contribution points have been added up and the final ranking has been decided.
Ark is currently in tie for 1st place with 50,830 contribution points.

"1st place?"

Ark's eyes became as big as plates at the unbelievable message.

When he received the final quest, Alan had twice as much contribution than Ark. And in the last battle, Alan had monopolized an enormous amount of contribution points with his AOE magic. Because of that, Ark had just about given up, but thanks to the contribution he earned in the ensuing underwater battle and by killing Valderas, he had caught up to Alan in the end.

He couldn't check the name of the other person who had tied for 1st place with him, but it was undoubtedly Alan.

'Still, to tie for 1st place...'

He didn't like that he had to share 1st place with Alan. He would've been able to overtake Alan if he had just killed one more monster before fighting Valderas... when he thought about it, it was such a shame. Still, he was 1st anyway. Thinking about what reward he would get from the Magic Institute made his heart race already. Then, another message popped up.

Your combined contribution has reached 1st place and can be registered on Jackson's message board.

If registered on the board, you will automatically enter the Hall of Fame and will earn an additional 2,000 EXP and 100 Fame. In addition, your name will become known to the many NPCs who see the board and you will receive respect.

Will you register?

It was a bonus given to the players in the top 10, who could put their names onto the message board. Ark shook his head without even considering it.

"Cancel."

NPCs weren't the only ones who saw the message board. Players would see it, too. There were, of course, many players who wanted their names known no matter what, but Ark absolutely rejected it. First of all, he didn't want his name put right next to Alan as the tied 1st place, and he didn't want the attention he'd receive. All he wanted was to quietly and discreetly collect the profit.

"Let's go, Dedric. Our business here is finished."

Ark walked underwater towards Jackson Castle. The long event quest had ended.

## Act 8 : Jackson's Hero

"Huhuhu, since I resolved the quest and even took 1st place, I'll definitely get a ton of bonus points!"

In the corner of a dark room, Hyun-woo grinned while his fingers tapped on the keyboard as though they were flying. After returning to Jackson, Hyun-woo had immediately logged out and gotten onto his computer. This was because all of the candidates had received an email telling them to submit a report as soon as the event quest ended. But even without the email, Hyun-woo wanted to write up a report right away.

Although he didn't register in the Hall of Fame, of course the Global Exos planning department would be aware Hyun-woo had tied for 1st place in contribution. If he sent in a report with the details on top of that, he would be able to make a strong impression. Only now did the vague idea of joining Global Exos feel real.

"I'm definitely in front of the other candidates! Getting into Global Exos isn't just a dream!"

In just a few minutes, Hyun-woo wrote up a 10 page report and sent the email.

Only then did his fatigue from the past three days hit him all at once.

\* \* \*

"Hahh, I feel like I've completely become an idiot." Kim Gwon-tae sighed with a fatigued expression.

It had been exactly 3 days since the event quest began. Though the same was probably also true for the players who had participated in the quest, he had needed to stay up all night battling with a computer during that time, in order to find out system information related to the quest. But his efforts were completely in vain; surprisingly, whenever the situation changed as the quest proceeded, the related information was locked down anew.

'This is really a monster.'

Even if it could and did exist within the realm of common sense, it was something that couldn't be. Despite being a regionally restricted quest, the participants numbered in the hundreds. As a result, there were thousands, tens of thousands, of possible variables. For a single computer to be checking all those simultaneously arising variables and automatically renewing the locks on them... Seeing as the data

was being constantly updated on the screen even now, he felt a little fear. A living monster... it could only be expressed in such terms.

‘The only way to make that possible is to put a master key on the highest level of the whole system. But how can the system realize this much freedom with a master key? Just what is it? Where is it hiding, this master key programmed in by the genius game director Park Woo-seong?’

Kim Gwon-tae was the deputy of the Global Exos Planning Department. He was a competent programmer and hacker, a hidden heavyweight who was known to be capable of hacking into even Interpol’s (International Criminal Police Organization) information network if he put his mind to it. Of course, it wasn’t like such rumors weren’t exaggerated, but he was certainly an internationally famous hacker.

Not only was he unable to clear a lock on the game, he couldn’t even identify the location of the hidden program that renewed the locks.

‘There’s only two things I can think of.’

Either New World’s main computer had an AI that was beyond imagination, or Park Woo-seong was continuously monitoring the game as he updated the locks from wherever he was hiding.

If the first option was the answer, then there was hope of lifting the lock one day. But if it was the second, the situation was more serious than expected. Even if they cleared a lock with difficulty, their efforts would go right down the drain if he renewed the lock, and an endless war of attrition would continue.

‘I heard that Park Woo-seong would have received considerable shares if New World went commercial, but why did he go as far as to give up on those shares and pull something like this? Damn it, I’m not really sure but Park Woo-seong is indeed amazing. Designing such a crazy system wasn’t enough, so he threw in all those locks like mines while maintaining the sense of unlimited freedom. It was not something a human can do.’

Aside from fear, respect for Park Woo-seong formed.

‘Hahh, seeing I have to fight such a ridiculous human being, maybe I chose the wrong job...’

It was nothing new, but for the last three days, he’d been forced to feel the piercing truth that he wasn’t a genius.

Kim Gwon-tae turned his gaze onto the monitor beside him. Since there was no way for him to access the system despite being an administrator, all he could do was to go through the scanty information sites and monitor the forum. Quite a few posts of participants who had been logged out in the final battle of the quest were currently being uploaded.

As he pulled out a cigarette and bit into it, his head tilted while scanning.

It was a post written 1 hour ago, but it already had 8,000 views and over 2,000 comments. Even posts put up three or four hours ago didn't exceed 1,000 views.

'Just what could it be about...'

When he clicked the info, an attached video started. It was gameplay taken from a player who had participated in the quest.

"What, what is this?"

Staring blankly at the screen, the cigarette fell from Kim Gwon-tae's lips.

The video showed about three minutes of an unknown player fighting the boss monster.

Visibility was poor due to the fog, but there was someone moving quickly within the murky water. Most of the players were busy struggling to escape, but he was actually pushing back the enemy and fighting fiercely in single combat. He dodged the outrageously swinging iron mace by a hair's breadth.

The scene of him counter-attacking and pushing the boss back with continuous attacks was the real highlight! With his occasional flashy kicks, it was enough to make someone think they were watching a martial arts movie. The duration was 3 minutes; it wasn't long, but it had the energy to overwhelm the viewer.

<p>– I saw a player solo the 130+ level boss that 50 players couldn't beat together. Because he was in the muddy water and was out of range of the [Detect] scroll, I couldn't check his name or level. I was unable to watch to the end because I was logged out in the middle of it, but it was amazing. I really want to know who it was.</p>
--

There was a tremendous number of comments on the poster's thread.

<p>– If he could fight a 130+ level boss on his own, just what is his level?</p>
<p>– Where do you learn the kicking skill?</p>
<p>– I have never seen someone move like this underwater, could it be an NPC for</p>

balance?
– Is this maybe a fake?
– It feels like a fake... but it's amazing if its real.
– It's me. I defeated the boss monster. Uhahahaha.
-To the person who commented above, as if. Shut up, wash your feet, and go to bed.

Overall, the reaction was that it was unbelievable.

Kim Gwon-tae had a hard time believing it too. That it was a player with a character in New World. He knew, at least, that it was hard to move underwater. In truth, the submerged players in the video were struggling.

Well, let's be generous and say there was a still unknown item that could remove the underwater penalty. But what the hell was that absurd situation of facing the boss monster head to head?

'Valderas is an elite boss. That means you'd have to be at least level 300 to face him... in just 4 months? In New World and not another game, is that possible?'

They were mostly aware of the high level players, but there was no player of such a level in his memories.

"Deputy Kim!" Just then, Ha Myung-woo shouted as he burst into the office. "Did you see the video on the info site? Fighting solo against the boss monster."

"Yes, I was just watching it."

"Can you find who that player is?"

"I do not know. I would ask around if we at least knew his face... but there is a way to find out. If he really killed the boss, then he would have gotten a huge number of contribution points. Naturally, he would be in the top of the rankings, so his name will probably come up onto the Hall of Fame soon."

"When does the event end?"

"There are about 30 minutes left."

"Report to me as soon as you have the information."

"Understood."

The data that the event quest had ended came up after 30 minutes passed. The lock that had triggered as the Dark Fog covered Jackson Territory was completely released. Kim Gwon-tae hurried to access the database and searched the contribution's top rankings. But the IDs that were on the message board were all just people he was already aware of.

"Just who the hell is he!"

"Damn it, reporters from the mass media will come out soon. Just how am I supposed to explain this?"

In the end, Ha Myung-woo made an appearance on TV on the evening of the next day and fudged it off with, "It could be an NPC. In order to stimulate more of the players' thirst for information, we will gradually publicize the exact details."

Having returned from the broadcast station, Ha Myung-woo spoke as he scratched his head with an annoyed expression.

"I'm sick of making shit up now. Deputy Kim, keep searching for that player's info. Whether he killed the boss monster or not, if he has that much skill then he'll definitely have burrowed deep into the system. There's no way he would have reached level 300 in 4 months otherwise. The media is showing interest in him too, so find him somehow and add him to the entrance examination no matter what. If he wants some kind of favor, then say we'll support him to the best of our abilities."

"For now, I will find out."

But the information Ha Myung-woo was so anxious about was not very far away. A shredder was situated in a corner of the office. Having been judged early as rejected, Ark's report was being shredded within.

\* \* \*

Around that time, the main character of the uproar that was heating up the Internet, Ark, was staring at the message board in Jackson Square with a displeased expression.

Notice to the residents of Jackson!

The Army of Darkness that filled Jackson with fear has disappeared. We express our gratitude and respect to the countless Warriors who fought to protect Jackson. If not for your sacrificial efforts, we wouldn't have never been able to see the light of daylight again.

Count Juan, who led the reinforcements from far away, has bestowed the title 'Honorable Knight' upon the Warriors with high contribution on behalf of the King. In addition, to the great Holy Knight Sir Alan who led the volunteer troops and accomplished a heroic feat, the shining title 'Knight of Glory' has been bestowed.

In order to commemorate their deeds, the Lord of Jackson has decided to erect a 'Bronze Statue of the 10 Warriors' in the castle square. From this day hence, the Bronze Statue of the 10 Warriors will bring great respect from Jackson residents and foreigners who come to Jackson and will forever remembered as a true model for Warriors.

Right after the quest ended, he logged in after collapsing into sleep for 10 hours to see that this notice had been put up. It felt like getting hit in the back of the head while sleeping.

'Aside from the reward from the 3 Great Guilds, they're even granting a title!'

In New World, a title had significant meaning. First of all, All Stats would rise by at least 1 if you received a title. Moreover, you sometimes gained a new skill or ability, and it could even serve as a chance to earn a top title.

When Ark received the titles Cat Knight and Caretaker of All, the raised stats, skills, and additional abilities created a tremendous additional effect. But Ark's name was not included in the list of the 10 Warriors written on the notice. That was because he refused to register on the message board. Even if he didn't register his contribution ranking, he received his proper reward from the Magic Institute. He had just been preoccupied by the message that had come up with the contribution ranking, but if he had known then that a title would be granted, the situation may have changed. He didn't like drawing player interest, but he would have put up with it if it was for a title.

Actually, not getting a title was fine. That other people had received it didn't sour his stomach too much either. The thing that really twisted his guts was that Alan had taken 1st place independently with Ark's registration refusal and had received the 'Knight of Glory' title. Thanks to that, Alan recovered his fallen Fame and established footing on growing faster. It really couldn't be anything but an extremely frustrating situation.

However, Ark then shook his head. 'Let's stop. It's already in the past. And there's no need for me to obsess too much about profits right in front of me. No matter what Alan gained, it's fine if I play the game my way and catch up to him.'

Ark's clinginess in everything was strong enough to be called vicious. But he was also quick to give up on something if it wasn't possible with effort. That was because he had learned that it was pointless to wave your hand after the bus left through his life that had involuntarily started sooner than others.

'At least it's good that I logged in after sleeping.'

If he had personally seen Alan receive the title and get puffed up about it, his mental health would have taken quite the wayward plunge.

But for better or for worse, Jackson was currently as quiet as if a typhoon had swept through it. After the Dark Fog lifted, the ship and carriage sent by the Merchant and Warrior Guilds reached Jackson. Rather than the Magic Institute's Letter Movement Orb, the Merchant and Warrior Guilds had sent NPCs to escort the players who safely completed the quest. As a result, all the players left like an ebbing tide and the once crowded Jackson felt deserted.

'Mister JusticeMan and Roco also pushed themselves quite a bit throughout the quest, so they're probably sleeping like logs right about now... but what happened to Shambala? He shouldn't have died. Is he still sleeping? Or did he already go somewhere else?'

He hadn't seen Shambala after being swept away by the rapids. Well, since he had given and received what was proper, it didn't matter if Shambala had left, but Ark was pretty sad that he had disappeared without a word.

His first meeting with Shambala hadn't been great. Ark had just wanted to try using his unique skill. But after fighting together, his impression of Shambala had changed a lot.

Shambala was a straightforward character. He says what he wants and keeps his promises. He wasn't the kind of person to talk smooth to your face while planning other schemes behind your back, like Alan. He did have a slightly prickly side, but Ark preferred that type to a smooth-spoken, good person.

'Well, it's fine if he left. I'm not the kind of person to go around with Shambala anyway.'

"Stat window!"

Ark decided to put those thoughts away for now and opened his stat window to leisurely check the results from the quest.

Character Name	Ark	Race	Human
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Alignment	Good +150		
Fame	1050	Level	78
Profession	Dark Walker		
Title	Cat Knight, Caretaker of All		
Health	1,575	Mana	1,235 (+100)
Spiritual Power	100	Strength	190
Agility	230 (+17)	Stamina	300
Wisdom	29	Intelligence	238
Luck	45	Flexibility	18
Art of Communication	23	Affection	37 (+10)
Special Stat: Knowledge of Ancient Relics			63
Equipment Effects			
Black Bear Mouse Leather Armor: Agility 2, Frost Resistance +20			
Cat Paws: Attack Speed +10%, Agility +15, Critical Hit Rate +10%			
Crystal Golem's Head: Mana +100			
Norad Boots: Movement Speed +10%, Evasion +5%			
Adelaine's Necklace: Defense +40, Affection +10			
Resurrecting Spirit: Strength +5, Mana Recovery +5%			
* All abilities will increase by 30% in the dark.			
* You have the ability to hide in the darkness (15 minutes duration. Cancelled when you get into combat).			
* Resistance Fear, Darkness, Blind, and Seduction spells is increased by 50%.			
* You can bring out the true abilities from all types of tools.			

When he first received the quest, his level had been 68. In other words, he had raised his level a whopping 10 times in just 3 days! It was a huge leap that couldn't even be imagined with just hunting.

The monsters that appeared in the event quest gave more experience compared to their level. But the decisive reason he leveled up 10 times was because he had beaten heavyweight boss monsters such as Narak and Valderas.

He had also obtained items of considerable value, like the magic ring he had gotten from Narak, the Resurrecting Spirit. A magic ring itself was an incredibly rare item. In addition, the Mana recovery rate option was such a thankful effect that it brought

tears to Ark's eyes, as he was always suffering from the lack of Mana. Was that all? He had also gotten the Unique iron mace Fire Slayer after defeating Valderas!

It was a difficult item for Ark to use, so he put it up on the auctions before logging in. He'd have to wait and see for the results, but it was on a different level of quality from the items he had sold off until now. It would probably sell for a considerable price.

Huhuhu, there was still more. That wasn't the end. The reward he had looked forward to most in the event quest! When he returned to Giran soon, he would get a reward fitting for a 1st place in contribution from the Magic Institute on top of it all.

Even if he didn't receive the likes of a title, for a reward that he had stayed up 3 days for, it was more than enough.

'That's right, I can't hope for more than this.'

Ark shook off his feeling of annoyance and strolled within Jackson Castle. After he finished his business here and returned to Giran, he didn't know when he would be back. He was of a mind to meet the Jackson NPCs who had helped him a lot and to whom he had much fondness for and say farewell. However, Ark soon had to experience a shocking situation.

"The Lord is busy with official business. Come back next time," said Cross in a cold voice when he went to see the young Lord.

"What? But I'll be leaving Jackson Castle soon. Just a moment is fine. I just want to say goodbye and..."

"Didn't I say he's busy?"

"Don't you know my relationship with the Lord?"

"Are you going to use your friendship with the Lord to get your way?" Cross' voice became a level colder. "The young Lord said he doesn't want to see anyone, leave."

"Even me?"

"Of course. Even you. No, especially you."

Ark was shocked. Until now, there had never been a problem when he went in and out of the Lord's Castle. His friends in the Soldiers had always greeted him amiably, and the young Lord had made time for him despite official business or whatever. But to suddenly refuse entry? In addition, his intimacy with Cross had reached

maximum while going through the quest together. But he had suddenly changed and was treating Ark like a person he was seeing for the first time.

‘Did something happen again?’

Ark asked more questions, but Cross wouldn’t answer anymore. In the end, Ark left the Lord’s Castle.

But the change in attitude wasn’t limited to Cross and the young Lord. Even the village NPCs he’d worked up a friendship with looked at him differently. The residents who used to recognize him from afar and approach were sneakily avoiding him. If he approached them first and initiated a conversation, they would flinch as they left without even replying or just brusquely nod.

“Ah, hey. It’s been a while. I’m busy so I don’t have time to chat. See you.”

“Ah... so... um, see you next time.”

‘Just what in the world is going on?’

He understood that the NPCs were busy restoring the ruined Jackson Castle. But no matter how busy they were, Ark couldn’t understand why they were treating him like this when his intimacy with them was high. How could they respond that coldly? Now they were treating him even more frostily than a beginner player who had just come to Jackson Castle. Even Raymond’s son, Tom, had the same response.

“Eh? Tom!” Ark saw Tom from afar and called out.

Holding a large bundle and moving quickly, Tom turned his head, startled. “Ark hyung!”

“Good timing, there’s something I want to ask...”

“No, that is... uh... I’m sorry. I’m busy right now. See you later.”

Tom stammered with an awkward look and hastily disappeared without giving Ark a chance to speak.

Ark was dumbfounded. Tom was an NPC who had revered Ark like a hero. And even just before he logged out, Tom had trailed behind Ark when he was in the village as he sent looks of respect flying towards him. But for him to run away even when Ark spoke to him first? As he stared blankly at Tom’s back, an ominous thought suddenly flashed in his mind.

‘Surely not... did the intimacy fall?’

If Cross and Tom were showing such an attitude despite having been at max intimacy, it was the only thing he could think of. But why? There was no reason that should be. He had never thieved or robbed in the village. Wasn't there no reason for his intimacy to fall?

'Could *that* have been a problem?'

There was just one difference between now and before he logged out. Ark didn't register his contribution ranking on the message board. Of course he would have been erased altogether from the list of contributors maintained in Jackson Castle. On the other hand, all the other players had gotten their names up on the contributor list, and the top 10 players received a title and were even inducted as the 10 Warriors.

NPCs responded sensitively to information on the message board and to rumors. The reason why players with high Fame could receive good treatment from NPCs no matter where they went was thanks to an internal value, the rumors between the NPCs. But Ark didn't even register on the message board, and he had always solved the quest while hiding in the back. In the eyes of the Jackson NPCs, Ark hadn't put in that much effort. If intimacy had fallen, then that was the only reason.

'Dammit, it's definitely something like that.'

When he came to that conclusion, something surged within him. Ark had worked harder than anyone all this time for Jackson's sake. Granted, it wasn't just for Jackson, but the result was he had played a crucial role in saving Jackson. He just hadn't registered onto the message board, but their treatment had changed this much.

Until now, Ark had really treated NPCs like people. He sympathized when he saw a pitiful person, and he minded his manners when he met the elderly. It was something another player would snort at, but to Ark, they were more precious than players.

'However, an NPC is just an NPC in the end...'

Since they were NPCs, of course they would receive the system's influence. If there was a reason that dropped their internal value, it was a natural result for their attitudes to take a sudden change.

He knew. He knew they were existences made to act this way. But he was also boundlessly dispirited by it. Though it may have been his own delusion, the reality hit him even harder because he had thought of them as real human beings.

'The relationship between the computer, humans, and NPCs has been that way from the beginning.'

He tried to understand, but there was no way to suppress his bitterness.

But no matter how much he regretted it, it was hopeless. Ark sighed as he headed towards the castle gate. He could use the Letter Movement Orb to fly to the Giran Magic Institute in an instant. However, there was still something he had to take care of in the Jackson vicinity. But just when he was about to leave through the gate, two Soldiers saw Ark and blocked his way, startled.

"A-Ark! S-stop!"

"Huh? Why?"

Ark cocked his head. The Guardsmen watching over the castle gate were also NPCs Ark had accumulated quite a lot of intimacy with.

"You cannot leave the castle right now."

"What do you mean? Didn't other people leave?"

"I don't know about other people, but you can't for now."

"Only I can't? Just why...?"

"If you can't, then you can't. We absolutely can't let you leave until this evening."

"I do not have time to wait until the evening. There is something I must do. Also, just what sin did I commit to be forbidden free entrance and exit of the castle gate?"

When Ark argued with an unhappy face, the Soldier thought for a while before answering.

"If you're that curious, I'll tell you. Actually, someone told the Lord about something related to you last evening. They said there was something suspicious, you know. So the Lord ordered Sir Cross to investigate that matter, and said to not let you out of the castle until the investigation ends."

'Is this the reason why the Jackson NPCs treated me coldly?' Only then did Ark realize that returning to Giran wouldn't be so simple. 'Even so, something suspicious? Just what is he talking about?'

Granted, there were quite a few things he was guilty of. There were the items he'd pocketed when rescuing the Silver Arrow crewmen, and also the incident where he

had made Alan's mission fail by making his raid eat the Howling Seasoned Chilies. If a crewman or Alan found out about these and made an objection, then there was a possibility it could become a problem.

"If you're innocent, then do as I said and wait inside the castle until the investigation ends."

'Dammit, this isn't an intimacy problem. If this goes wrong..'

He could be labeled a criminal and a big issue could arise.

Ark became urgent at heart. He had to leave the castle at once. But if the Lord had issued a command, then there was no doubt he would be denied use of the magic tower as well. Moreover, it was currently daytime. He couldn't use 'Stealth' to leave through the gate. Even so, he was leery about thoughtlessly waiting until the evening. Ark was agonizing with a troubled face when—

"Ark, so you were here." Cross approached from behind him with three or four Soldiers. "I was looking for you. You'll have to come with me for a bit."

"Huh? But I'm..."

"You have no right to refuse. Oi, take Ark."

Without even giving him a chance to speak, the Soldiers tied Ark up.

\* \* \*

'Where is this place?'

Ark turned his head around with an anxious look, but he couldn't see anything because the Soldiers had even thrown a blindfold over him. But judging from the distance they had moved and the sounds he heard around him, it didn't seem like a prison or a court. Considering his ears were picking up birdsong and he could feel the brush of the wind, he was probably in an expansive, open space...

'How come I've been dragged to a place like this?'

Just then, he suddenly heard a heavy voice in front of him.

"Are you Ark?"

"Yes, I am. But..."

“From now on, answer only to the questions I ask. I won’t permit any other talk. Now, this is the first question. I heard you’ve used your friendship with the Lord to receive the task of guarding the back gate with the Guard even though you came to Jackson with the volunteer troops. Did you think to sit in a sufficiently comfortable position and take credit for participating in the volunteer troops?”

“It’s not like that!” Ark shouted in an angry voice. “It’s certainly true that I joined in with the Guards through my friendship with the Lord. But I swear upon my word, I had not a whit of selfishness. I simply thought I should act in such manner for Jackson, and I always fought the enemy on the front lines even while I was with the Guard. You could verify as much if you check with Sir Cross, the guardsmen, and the Lord.”

“Not a whit of selfishness? Then just why did you go so far as to put your life on the line and fight?”

“I came to help Jackson Castle simply because of a sense of duty.”

“Sense of duty? A foreigner like you?”

“Yes, this place is very special to me. I was friendly with all of the residents and the territory’s Soldiers, and of course with the current Lord, but even the previous Lord treated me, a mere beginner foreigner, like a friend. I felt the sincerity of the Lord and residents of Jackson and was touched. So this is how it feels to have a heart to heart friend. That is how I felt. And even now, there is no change in what I feel.”

“Is that why you went in and out of the refugee camp to nurse the patients?”

“H-how did you know that...?”

As Ark murmured with a shaken voice, he heard laughter in his vicinity. Then he heard the familiar young Lord’s voice.

“Hahaha, let’s stop joking. Sir Cross, remove the blindfold.”

When the blindfold came off, Ark wasn’t able to open his eyes because of the fierce sunlight. As he blocked the sunlight with his hand and blinked a few times, Ark’s face went blank.

It was a broad lot in the corner of Jackson Castle— countless people were gathered there. The young Lord, Cross, the Sylphid Knights, the Guards, residents, and the patients from the refugee camp...

All the NPCs of Jackson had gathered and were looking at Ark. And they weren't the frosty looks he'd gotten just a little before, either.

They were gazes filled with affection hard to put into words.

"J-just what in the world is this..."

"Ark, we are truly grateful to you," Said the young Lord as he seized Ark's hand.

"Huh? What are you...?"

"You led the Guards and Militia numbering only 50 people and accomplished the seizure of the scorch cannon. In addition, the person who blew up the dike in the final battle and drove Valderas into a corner was you, right? We all heard from Raymond, who was controlling the scorch cannon then. Even with that alone, you achieved an astonishing deed. It is not second to the 10 Warriors... no, it is a greater service than them. Honestly, it's to the extent that I cannot understand how you slipped out of the contributor list."

That was, of course, because Ark refused registration. But an issue related to the system was something an NPC couldn't understand.

"However, there's something else that I am truly thankful for. I knew many of the refugees, who fled to the castle, were suffering from the disease. But there wasn't much I could do. Also, many volunteers turned away from them as well. However, I heard you went to them every single day even while fighting battles and nursed them with sincerity. Even so, not once did you speak of your own good deeds."

When the Guard was sleeping like babies, there was no other way for him to raise his contribution. And since contribution came in automatically when he nursed, there was no need for him to run off his mouth and draw the attention of other players. But the young Lord believed it was because of Ark's sacrificial spirit and had an expression devoid of doubt.

"Thanks to you, many patients have now regained their health. And they came to me and requested, saying they were just refugees with nothing, but they wanted to repay you somehow. You're not one to flaunt your good deeds, so weren't you unable to receive a reward from the commander of the reinforcements, Count Juan? While it's difficult to call it a substitute reward, it would be an eternal shame if we sent you, a person who loves Jackson more than anyone and doesn't spare himself any suffering for its sake, off with empty hands. Therefore, we joined hands with the residents and prepared a small gathering."

Cross and the Soldiers smiled sheepishly next to him. "I went and said something harsh while trying to keep it a secret from you. Sorry. Please understand."

"...!"

Ark glanced around him with a dumb look. Jackson NPCs were gazing at him with eyes filled to the brim with affection. A war had swept through Jackson Castle, rendering it so devastated that it was painful to behold. On one side of the lot, worn tables that had fallen from somewhere were laid out in rows, and the food the refugees had wholeheartedly prepared had been set on top.

"Being truly grateful to you, these are dishes the refugees made by hand. I thought you might like these more than food prepared by me. Are they not to your liking, by any chance?"

"How could I not..."

The tip of his nose abruptly crinkled. An indescribable emotion welled up.

The NPCs were living within the reality of the game; having endured a war in such a place, a handful of food was as precious as their lives. They had offered it without regret to Ark. It was only common bread, a little meat, and alcohol in crude bowls, but how could he think of it as meaningless? Furthermore, for a whole five years, Ark had never eaten food prepared by another person. However, a great number of NPCs had prepared him a meal inside a game. For Ark alone...

As he looked at each and everyone one of the residents, the sadness that had filled him just a little before disappeared like melting snow. In its place, he felt boundless fondness for those who had prepared a party for him.

"This is a more precious gift than any other I have ever received."

"I thought you would say so," said the young Lord as he smiled gently.

As Ark's eyes welled with tears, a wave of quiet emotion swept through the lot. A few of the residents were following Ark and even dripping tears. Looking at Ark with brimming eyes, Tom wiped his tears as he spoke to Raymond.

"Dad."

"Ah, that's right. Hey, all of you. This isn't a place we made so we could sniffle and weep, yes? This is a place we prepared for our true hero, Ark. Everyone raise your glasses. To bless our hero Ark's future!"

“OH HH, ARK!”

“OUR HERO!”

The residents cheered as they raised their glasses high.

The young Lord raised his glass with a pleased face and handed it to Ark. “You aren’t a person who sings his own praises. Even if you do a virtuous deed, not many people will recognize you for it. But look. A heroic deed won’t be hidden if you try to hide it. Rather, the more you hide it, the more it shines; we call such a person a hero. No matter what someone else says, to the people raising their glasses in this moment and this place, you are a hero. A brilliant hero who shines from a distant, high place. I am truly proud to know such a genuine hero.”

It was then. A cheerful tune rang out as a message window popped up.

You have received the title ‘Jackson’s Hero’ from the Jackson residents.

A person who receives the praises and interest of the people is not the only one who can become a hero. Rather, a true hero is someone who does not speak of his own virtues. As you do not boast your contributions, not everyone in the world will recognize you, but a heroic action will most definitely be rewarded. It will also be found out at some point and will impart a deep impression.

Jackson’s Hero is one of the ‘Unknown Righteous One’ titles. This is not known to many people, but it possesses the characteristic ‘Unrevealed Virtue’ — many people will quickly approach you with friendliness. The characteristic will induce many changes in a quest’s progression or commission.

\* As a title related bonus, All Stats rise by 2.

\* Intimacy with all Jackson residents has increased to the maximum value.

\* Fame increased by 50.

\* As an influence of ‘Unrevealed Virtue,’ there will be a 30% penalty to Fame in all quest rewards from hence forth. In exchange, you will receive a 30% bonus in intimacy with NPCs.

‘I didn’t even register in the Hall of Fame, but a title...!’

Ark’s lips spread from ear to ear.

Jackson’s Hero — what a marvelous title! And it was a top title that raised all stats by 2! It was a bonus he hadn’t even considered.

The one thing that bothered him was the Fame penalty from the title. But the profession Ark had chosen was Dark Walker; to a Dark Walker who lived enshrouded in darkness, Fame was merely a decoration. Rather, it was far more profitable to trade off the unnecessary Fame for an intimacy bonus.

‘When you dig a well, you have to dig deep after all.’

The bellyache that had triggered after hearing the news of Alan receiving a title flew away in an instant.

A merry festival began shortly afterwards. Some residents came out holding instruments and played, and some clambered onto the tables and danced. The young Lord and the Soldiers also went along with them and sang as they clapped in rhythm. For the first time since the Dark Fog had descended, the residents shouted brightly and laughed openly.

“Isn’t that music?”

“I hear it from the lot over there, but just what could be going on?”

“All the so-called shops are closed, too... I can’t see that many Soldiers, either?”

The players in Jackson showed interest as they gathered. But they couldn’t enter because Soldiers were blocking the area around the lot. Having judged that Ark liked the ‘Unrevealed Virtue,’ the young Lord had blocked the entrance of other players. This was an event for Ark alone... it was a party.

As the party went on, Ark received so much food and drink that his stomach was on the verge of exploding as he was dragged around everywhere. At around the time when the fun ripened to its peak, Ark suddenly remembered JusticeMan, Roco, and the Militiamen, the people who had been with him to the end. They had participated up until the final battle despite their low levels, but they had regrettably died and hadn’t been able to receive any rewards.

‘Isn’t there something I can do for them?’

Ark approached the young Lord and gently tested the waters. “I am truly happy that Jackson Territory has regained its peace.”

“Indeed, this is all thanks to you, Sir Alan, and the volunteer troops.”

“Yes, but the Militia’s help was as great as theirs.”

“Of course. If not for them, Jackson might have fallen before the volunteer troops even arrived.”

Tipsy with wine, the young Lord nodded with a serious face.

“Among them, several participated in the final battle and contributed greatly in bringing down Valderas. But unfortunately, they all took great injuries and were unable to participate in the battle until the end. Many volunteer troops will receive their deserved rewards from the 3 Great Guilds, but not a single one of the Militia, who rallied at the Lord’s request from the very beginning and didn’t spare themselves for Jackson’s sake, received recognition for their contribution. It pains my heart so much.”

An NPC recognized a player who died in battle as wounded. It seemed NPCs regarded the fact that resurrection took 3 days, unlike usual, as having taken a big injury, making the recovery slow. Fundamentally, it didn’t hold up to the rigors of logic, but for the NPCs who accepted New World as reality, there was no other way for them to interpret the death and resurrection of a player.

“Mm, you did well to tell me. I too was bothered by that.”

“Though it was difficult for the entire Militia, there were several who didn’t spare themselves until the end — is there no way to give them, at least, the reward their efforts deserve?”

“I wonder... I too am aware of the Militia’s hard work. I also heard the Militia leader is an individual with such outstanding tactics and sense of justice that Sir Cross praised him with spittle flying from his mouth. However, it’s a custom that contribution is only acknowledged for those who end the battle successfully...”

Even when Ark, who had 100%, no, 1,000% intimacy tried to persuade him, the young Lord only sighed with a troubled expression.

It seemed that an NPC really couldn’t mess with the game system. Ark gave up on rewards in the end and changed his direction a little.

“Of course, I know it’s too much to hope for some kind of material reward. But if the Lord would remember their efforts and treat them as such in Jackson, it would be a great help to them.”

Ark had personally experienced just how much profit there was when a high ranking NPC like a Lord paid special attention to you. In some respects, getting their names known by the Lord could yield a greater profit for the still low-leveled JusticeMan and Roco than a reward of several Gold.

The young Lord showed a positive response at Ark's suggestion. "Something like that is not very difficult, alright... You're right. As a matter of fact, Jackson Territory's forces have been greatly depleted from this incident, so I was worrying because there are gaps in our public security. Ark, tell them to come find me when they regain their health. It won't be bad to try slowly discussing what they can do and what I can do for them, either."

"Yes, sir."

## **Act 9 : To Giran again**

"Hey, Hyun-woo. Over here."

As he entered the cafe, Gwon Hwa-rang waved from the side. Jung Hye-sun was also sitting next to Gwon Hwa-rang. Though it hadn't been long since they had met, there was no sense of awkwardness between them.

Well, there were many people who grew close from hunting together even back in the days when they enjoyed online games with cookie cutter characters. Gwon Hwa-rang and Jung Hye-sun had spent almost a month together with characters that looked similar to their real selves in a virtual reality game. There was no reason to be awkward.

"What's the occasion to call me out at a time like this?"

"It's because we don't have much time to talk in the game."

"That's true."

Hyun-woo nodded as he sat on the opposite side.

"Is the game worth playing?"

"Ahhh, it's really such a shame. I could explode in anger from not knowing about something this good until now."

"What about you, Hye-sun?"

"I'm having fun, too. But I'm upset I don't have much time to play."

"That can't be helped, since real life is more important than the game. You have to study, too. Speaking of which, you don't have much time before your test, right? You can raise your level anytime if mister Gwon or I help you, so concentrate on studying for now, understand? One should study when they can."

"Che, nagging like an old man..." Jung Hye-sun pursed her lips, but it didn't seem like she disliked Hyun-woo's meddling. "But what are you going to do now?"

"Hm, I thought about it, and I think I'm going to have to hole up somewhere decent and level up a lot. I felt just how terribly weak I was during this quest. Whether in real life or the virtual world, I can't stand being weaker than others, because justice can only be realized with strength."

"You're really the same as ever."

"Walk the path of work, people, and games! That's what it is to be a man!"

Enthusiasm blazed in Gwon Hwa-rang's eyes. It was a look that Hyun-woo hadn't seen in a really long time. Once again, he thought that he had done well to suggest New World to Gwon Hwa-rang.

"It's good that you're going to stay at Jackson for a while. When you log in, go meet the Lord."

"The Lord?"

"Yes, the Lord says he has something to talk to you about. Try becoming well acquainted with him. Raising your intimacy with an NPC like the Lord will be a huge help."

Hyun-woo laughed at Gwon Hwa-rang's dazed expression. After that, he ate dinner with Jung Hye-sun and Gwon Hwa-rang, visited the hospital, and returned home. Even though it was already night time, he turned on his computer and accessed the auction site as soon as he got home. He was extremely curious about the result of the auction items he had recently put up.

- Auction has ended. Gauntlets of Strength: 750,000 Won (~\$750)
- The auction has been in progress for 7 hours. Fire Slayer : 6,800,000 Won (~\$6,800)

'6,800,000 Won!

He felt like he couldn't breathe.

The Gauntlets of Strength he had put up in the 6 hour auction were sold for a final bid of 750,000 Won. He thought he'd be able to get 800,000 Won for it, but the sum was a little short of his expectations. However, there was still the Unique mace he had put up in a 72 hour auction with great expectations. Within just 7 hours, an enormous price had been attached to the Fire Slayer. He had expected it would sell for a high price since it was a rare and Unique weapon, but the price had rocketed to 6,800,000 Won in 7 hours in a 72 hour auction. There were still 65 hours left. Looking at how things were going, it seemed like it could easily exceed 10,000,000 Won (~\$10,000). That was enough to live for two months without worrying about money.

'This is no different from my first harvest as a pro gamer. But I can't be satisfied here. Getting by is most important, but I'm not playing the game just to get by. Now there's hope in passing the entrance exam. I submitted the report about getting 1st place in contribution with Alan in the event quest, so my evaluation in Global Exos has probably gone up a little.'

He had worked to death in the quest, but once the floodgates started to open, everything worked out well. Hyun-woo couldn't contain his overflowing enthusiasm and got into the unit.

\* \* \*

Ark left Jackson Castle and went into the forest.

If he used the Magic Institute's tower in Jackson, he could teleport to Giran in an instant. Truthfully, he was impatient to get to Giran right away to check his reward for the event quest. He also had to find a way to end Snake's metamorphosis as soon as possible. However, Ark still had business to attend to in the area.

Envoy of the Merpeople
The Queen of the Merpeople regrets the past mistakes and wishes to reconcile with the Meow. For you, who has high Intimacy with both the Merpeople and Meow, you should be able to easily reconcile the two races.
Difficulty: G
Quest Requirement: Meow and Merpeople intimacy must be over 70%.

There was a place he had to go to at least once sometime to resolve the quest he had received from the Mermaid Queen of the Underwater City, Nodelesse. Truthfully, the difficulty was so-so, and even if he completed the quest, he couldn't go back to the Merpeople to get his reward. At best, he could get a little EXP. That was why Ark hadn't been in a hurry even after receiving the quest. However, the ruins where

the Meow lived weren't far from Jackson Territory, so he thought he would resolve it before leaving.

The first time he went to the ruins, he had ridden a horse. As a result, he had thought it wasn't such a far distance, but once he was actually walking there, it took quite a while. However, that was fine in its own way.

'It's been too grim lately.'

Throughout the event quest, he had fought while engulfed in Dark Fog. Although he had leveled up 10 times thanks to the quest, both his body and mind were tired. Even if he was a Dark Walker, there was no way he would be peachy since he had spent 3 days of real time in the darkness.

Ark appreciated the awesome landscape of New World as he leisurely headed towards the ruins. Of course, Ark wasn't one to let his hands idle even if it was a break. He didn't forget to root through every corner of the forest to restock on the ingredients he had completely used up. Most of his skills were Intermediate now. Collecting or cooking low level ingredients didn't raise his skill proficiency. But Ark had already moved to a high level hunting ground, so obtaining low level ingredients was even more difficult. He needed some low leveled ingredients to make safe food, so it was better to get them while he could.

GRRR!

As he swept through the forest, a Wolf or a Dire Wolf would occasionally show up. But now, such opponents were cute instead. Killing them granted almost no EXP or skill proficiency; a player of a similar level to Ark would probably find it troublesome and simply pass by. However, Ark was different. Although he didn't go looking for them, but he could never just pass by a monster that showed up before his eyes.

'Even 1 EXP is EXP, and 1 Copper is still money!'

Accumulating even 1 EXP would bring you up a level, and saving up 1 Copper would become Gold. That was Ark's steadfast mindset. Also, it was fun to hunt comparatively low level monsters. Seeing a Wolf lose 60% of its Health in one strike made him feel he had become stronger.

Hunting that was actually comfortable!

They were no good for EXP, but it was really refreshing. When he was sweeping through the forest later, the monsters were frightened and stealthily avoided him.

Just when he was growing tired of that kind of hunting, the ruins came into sight at last.

‘Huh? The feeling is way different.’

The ruins had changed so much that he wondered if he was in the right place. The bleak atmosphere around the ruins had vanished, replaced by a brighter one. All sorts of wild flowers were in full bloom at the warm, sunny entrance, emitting a feeling of splendor. He saw cats peacefully enjoying naps amongst the wild flowers. Ark approached a girl who was surrounded with cats.

“Long time no see, Jana.”

“Oh? Aren’t you Ark?”

Looking glad to see him, Jana approached with her tail waving gently.

“Have you been well?”

“Well, there hasn’t been anything special,” Jana replied insincerely as she pressed her nose in at him, sniffing. Then she giggled as she looked at Ark anew.

“Hnng, back then you were a kid, but now you smell like a man. You’ve become quite tempting. When you have the time, want to go out with me?”

“Thanks, but I’ll decline,” Ark answered with a wry smile.

If your level or Fame rose, the responses of NPCs changed slightly as well. There were many times when NPCs in a new village would show a disdainful attitude if your level and Fame were low, but once your level became high, they would give you proper adventurer treatment. Jana was also merely responding to the rise in level; there wasn’t any other intent to it. Even if there was, he wasn’t desperate enough to want to date an NPC yet.

Of course, it would be different if a beauty like Jana were to approach him in real life...

As expected, Jana asked as if she didn’t really care, “But what’s the occasion?”

“I want to meet the elder, is he in the ruins?”

“Nope, after you left we took care of all the monsters left in the temple, so there’s really no need to stay in the temple. We’re currently making a residence around here.”

"Will you take me to it?"

"Yeah, follow me."

The place Jana guided him to was a forest pretty far from the ruins. The fifteen Meow Warriors he had seen before were gathered in a sufficiently sized clearing. The Meow Warriors were concentrating on something else for a while, so they weren't aware that Ark had come.

However, there was no knowing what exactly they were doing. The big bodied men trembled as they piled up a mess of small logs. But even a child could see that the logs were poorly stacked, and they soon fell over.

"Agh, dammit! This is so frustrating!"

"I can't take it anymore! Nya, nya, nya!"

Whenever that happened, the Meow youths angrily scratched the logs with their claws.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I told you. We're building a house."

"But I can only see that you're playing around?"

"What I'm saying is..."

Jana heaved a sigh. "Meows are originally Warriors from birth. We can fight for days without rest, but our handicraft skills suck. Thanks to that, we've been building a house for two months already, but it's as you can see. I think it's gonna take about 10 years or so."

"Then where did you live before you trapped in the ruins?"

"Our friends among the Humans built the village we lived in before. However, it was neglected while we were locked up for a long time, so now there isn't even a trace of it left. The Humans we knew all grew old and died, and sociability isn't our strong suit. So we haven't been able to ask the Humans and ended up like this."

"Can't you live in the ruins?"

"It's not a ruin. It's a temple, and a temple is not a place for the homeless to live. It's alright for me since I'm the temple's Shaman, but the other Meows can't. We finally

cleaned out the monsters, so if dirty men were crawling around in there, what would be the difference from before?" Jana retorted with pouty lips.

So she was saying she didn't care if the Meow built a house or slept in the open, huh? Just like a cat.

Anyway, whether she was a cat or a dog, it wasn't Ark's concern. Once he passed the Meow who were either building the house or breaking it, he found Hassan under a huge tree. Hassan had given the work to his underlings and was stretched out in a nap.

When Jana gave him a kick, Hassan sprang awake. Then he looked around, shaking his head like crazy, and when he saw Ark, he greeted him with a grin.

"Ohh, who's this? Isn't this our friend, Truthseeker Ark?"

"I have come to meet you, elder."

"Me? Okay, what's the problem?"

"The truth is..." Ark fully explained the situation between Hero Maban and the Mermaid Queen, as well as how the Merpeople had misunderstood the Meow due to conflicting opinions on their relationship. Then he added, "The current Mermaid Queen wants to clear up the past misunderstanding and reconcile with the Meow. How about accepting their apology, at least in consideration for Hero Maban and Adelaine's sad love, which ended in tragedy long ago? Apparently the Merpeople one-sidedly hated the Meow, but isn't that all in the past now?"

"Aahh, right. Something like that did happen," answered Hassan indifferently as he scratched his messy head.

It seemed like he hadn't thought much of the fight with the Merpeople.

"Well, I didn't really care, but it was certainly a nasty incident. However, as you said, that, too, is a thing of the past, since the latest friction with the Merpeople occurred when I was young. The other kiddos probably haven't even seen the Merpeople."

"You've met the Merpeople before?"

"Of course."

"The elder has lived for hundreds of years. He's a living fossil," Jana commented with a laugh.

“Shush, who are you calling a fossil?” Hassan pierced Jana with a glare before opening his mouth again with a cough. “Honestly, I don’t really care whether the Merpeople want to reconcile or not. It’s not that hard to accept their apology, either. However, it’s a bit much to accept an apology for such an old grudge with just one word. It’s like we’ve been waiting on our hands and knees for it or something.”

“Don’t be like that and please accept for me, at least.”

“Hmm, if you say it like that, I can’t just refuse... How discomfiting.” Hassan scratched his head with an uncomfortable look. Then, as if a thought had suddenly struck him, he asked with flashing eyes, “Now that I think about it, you are a Human. Then how about we do it like this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look around. As you can see, we’re currently stuck in a very big predicament. If we go on like this, we won’t be able to build a mud hut, let alone a house, even after a few years. I would like you to solve that problem for us.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, since you’re a Human, don’t you have one or two friends in the nearby village? Go ask them to build a house for us. A simple cabin shouldn’t even take a week to build for a Human. Only then will I accept the Merpeople’s apology,” said Hassan with a proud expression, as if he had cooked up a great idea.

In contrast, Ark’s expression contorted strangely. “What does that have to do with accepting the Merpeople’s apology?”

“It’s related. You’re our friend, but didn’t you come as the envoy of the Merpeople? Then you should help us. Then doesn’t that give us a justification to accept the apology in exchange?”

Put that way, it made quite a lot of sense.

‘There’s a saying about being as wily as a cat; contrary to his looks, Hassan really used his head.’

But to Ark, it was an unwelcome condition. He hadn’t come all this way expecting a great reward. He just wanted to finish off a quest he’d picked up while he was here. But if he were to go Jackson and back for a G level quest, he’d be wasting too much time. He also couldn’t be sure of finding an NPC craftsman. All the NPC craftsmen in Jackson were mobilized to repair the damages from the war. No matter how high his intimacy was, a request without a decent reason would be rejected, and there

wouldn't be an NPC willing to fling away Jackson to follow him all the way here to build a house for cats. Even so, not being able to finish the quest after coming all this way here bothered him.

'A house for cats... maybe that...?'

At that moment, an idea sparked in Ark's head. There was a quest that fit this situation perfectly.

'The 'Find New Settlers' quest!'

He hadn't been able to find a clue to solving that quest after receiving it in Lancel Village. Actually, he had brought it with a few NPCs, but they had all refused. But shouldn't there be a high chance of success if it was the Meow, who weren't tethered to the territory and were looking for a place to live?

'Yeah, the Meow are homeless right now. Then should I try bringing it up once?'

After thinking about it for a bit, Ark said with a subtle tone, "Then how about this?"

"Go ahead."

"There is a settler town I know well not far from here. Many people left, so there are a lot of empty houses there. If you ask them, they will supply the Meow with the necessary housing."

"A Human village? Are you saying the honorable Meow should sponge off a Human village?" Even before he finished talking, Hassan grumbled with an unpleasant voice.

It was the reaction he had expected. Unlike dogs, cats were originally animals that didn't match well with humans. Even if one was raised with affection from kittenhood, it wasn't subservient to the human as its owner. There were even many cases where some cats acted charmingly only at mealtime, only to immediately abandon the facade after mealtime and leave the house.

To put it badly, they are mannerless; to put it nicely, cats are animals with a strong sense of independence and pride.

Having inherited such catlike natures, the Meow wouldn't want to become beholden to Humans. That was also the reason they struggled to build a house for 2 months without being able to go ask Humans for help. Once their friend Ark showed up, they were being "generous" and asking for help. But that was what Ark was aiming for.

Ark let out a sigh as he nodded. "You really don't like it, huh? Truthfully, I also thought it was a shameless request. It's also dangerous..."

"What? A request? It's dangerous? Just what are you saying now?"

"No, it's fine. Pretend you didn't hear anything."

"Dammit, do you want to see someone explode and die? I can take pain but I'm the kind of person who can't contain curiosity. Whatever it is, just give it to me straight!"

Did they say curiosity killed the cat? Just like a cat, Hassan couldn't contain his restlessness and got caught.

'Huhuhu, got him. I've got him on the line.'

Ark hid a satisfied smile as he pretended to be against it. "Yes, the truth is the village was once under attack by monsters and pushed to the brink of life and death. Thankfully it has become safer than before, but monsters are still around. There's no knowing when it could face danger again. That's why I thought it'd be nice if the valiant Meow could protect them. It's not sponging off, but being reasonably rewarded while protecting them. Just like nobles."

"Ohh, monsters? Are there a lot of monsters in the area?"

"Yes, there are a lot of strong monsters. The ones called Gnolls in particular are pretty dangerous."

"Gnolls! Did you just say Gnolls?" Hassan yelled, jumping up. The Meow building the cabin also approached, their eyes wide. "If they're Gnolls, then they're the dog-heads! Right?! You're talking about the noisy dog-heads that bark?"

"That's right. They are quite strong and vicious. Even for the Meow, protecting the village from such monsters would be..."

"Nonsense!" As Ark subtly slowed to a stop, Hassan shouted. "Even if hundreds of the likes of those stupid dog-heads were to press in, they'd be no match for the brave Meow. Yes, the dog-heads have long been enemies of the Meow. Why? Don't ask, because I don't know either. Anyway, I hate the dog-heads like crazy! To think those dog-heads got this close to the sacred temple of the Meow while our eyes were briefly turned away! Knowing this, we can't just overlook it!"

"Then are you accepting my suggestion?"

“Yeah. If they’re being threatened by the dog-heads, then we must go help Lancel Village or whatever it’s called. It is definitely not because of a house or food. We’re just staying there a bit to defend the pride of the Meow while we wipe out the dog-heads for them. Though of course, to do that we must rest comfortably and eat our fill...”

“Don’t worry. If you will protect the village, the residents will gladly cover the room and board the Meow desire.”

As Ark said that with a grin, a message popped up with a cheerful sound effect.

– Art of Communication has increased by 3.
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The quest ‘Find New Settlers’ has been updated.
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You have wisely convinced the Meow Elder Hassan to migrate to Lancel Village. The Meow are a valiant tribe possessing a natural Warrior disposition. If they guard Lancel Village, the villagers will no longer have to fear monsters.
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This will be a great help to the Lancel villagers, who wish for safety more than anything else. As they will get what they want thanks to the Meow, they will readily provide a housing and food.
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Finding new settlers: 15% complete.
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You have found settlers with special abilities.
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With the migration of the Meow, a Warrior tribe, Lancel Village’s safety has risen by 40%. However, since they have to be steadily furnished with food, the food situation has worsened by 10%.
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If you invite a settler with a special ability, trade, safety, and the food situation values will increase. Depending on the values, you will be able to receive a bonus reward upon quest completion.
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‘What’s this?’

After checking the message, Ark’s eyes widened.

It was an unthought-of message. He had thought that he just had to increase the number of people. But looking at the message that popped up last, it seemed there

was a hidden achievement system besides the completion value. Just like a RTS (Real-time Strategy) game he had tried a long time ago, safety increased if he sent a Warrior, and a Craftsman NPC would increase trade. The reward would change depending on the result when the completion hit 100%.

‘I’m not supposed to just send random refugees!’

It was obvious if he thought about it a little more deeply. The quest’s objective was to revive Lancel Village. If he supplied the village with good manpower, then of course it would develop more.

There are countless ways to resolve a single quest. There was no knowing how an action or a single word would take effect. Ark realized that point once again. It was a system that could either be called picky or fun.

‘But only 15%?’ Thinking the quest would definitely be completed, Ark was displeased. ‘I sent fifteen folks but it amounted to 15%? So does that mean I need to find at least 80 more?’

He had found fifteen people one month after receiving the quest. Considering he needed to go looking in other places to gather another 80, his mind reeled. But in any case, he’d found a clue to resolving the quest.

‘Well, if a quest is difficult, it’s better the more difficult it is. ‘Cause that means the reward will greater.’

Ark was positive at all times.

“Dog-heads, you say they’re the dog-heads? Huhuhu, you’ve given us good info. My blood is boiling for the first time in a while.”

Hassan’s whiskers were already stiff as his will blazed. He thanked Ark, who had changed their boring house building to Gnoll hunting, by rubbing his entire body over him.

“We don’t have to build a house now?”

“We can really play around and eat while only hunting, right?”

“Hooray, freedom!”

The gathered Meow Warriors also wagged their tails like crazy as they leapt around.

“You are truly a lump of good luck. I mean, we can’t help but love you since you solve our problems whenever you show up. No, I shouldn’t be doing this, I want to

give you some kind of reward... Dang it, we've got nothing right now because that Debra rascal ransacked the temple..."

When Hassan fretted about wanting to do something for Ark, Jana snapped at him with a pitying voice. "Elder, do you have dementia? There's that one thing you said you'd do for Ark if he happened to come again."

"What? Ahh, yes. That's right. I completely forgot about it."

"You'll do something for me? What are you talking about?" asked Ark with a piqued expression. Could he possibly receive a separate reward with the Envoy of the Merpeople quest?

"Huhuhu, we have a surprise present prepared for you. No, I shouldn't be saying it, follow me."

Hassan and Jana took Ark to the temple. With the monsters gone, the inside of the temple had become much neater. They walked along a long corridor and the chamber that Debra had inhabited soon appeared. Once they arrived in the room, Hassan extended his hand.

"Fortunately you still have the Cat Paws I gave you. Give them to me for a bit."

As Ark took off the Cat Paws, Hassan explained, "You probably don't know how valuable these are because I gave them to you so suddenly. Actually, they are an extremely precious magic armament that can completely draw out the wearer's ability. However, to draw out the full ability of a Meow armament, it has to receive a Shaman's blessing. But the temple was polluted when I gave the armament to you, so we couldn't bless it. You also looked like you weren't qualified to equip a blessed armament."

His question of 'then shouldn't you have told me that sooner?' was resolved by Jana.

"Che, you're just making that up... you just forgot about it."

"S-shut up! Don't talk back and bless it already!"

Hassan hurriedly equivocated and put the Cat Paws on top of the altar. Jana's face sobered. A short while afterwards, he heard a melody, as if an acoustic guitar was being played somewhere.

That was when Jana started dancing around and around the altar in rhythm to the melody. The cats that had followed them into the temple chased Jana as they sang.

Nya, nyaa, nyaaaa, nya, nya, nya~

Just what should he call this... A scene like the one where animals had performed a musical in a cartoon film he'd watched when he was young?

Since a girl that looked perfectly normal was doing such a thing, the watching Ark was more embarrassed, but it *was* fun in its own way. Then, after some time had passed, a beam of light suddenly shone in from above the altar; when it touched the Cat Paws, a bluish light flowed out.

"Phew, it's done. That was frickin' embarrassing," Jana mumbled as she wiped the sweat that had soaked her. As expected, she had been embarrassed too.

"Tsk, what poor conduct despite being a so-called Shaman..." Hassan grumbled as he handed the Cat Paws to Ark. "Alright, they're all done. Here, try equipping them now. You'll find out why the Meow are so strong."

They didn't look any different except for a blue light shimmering at the ends of the fingertips. But the moment he checked their info, his mouth fell open on its own.

Blessed Cat Paws (Rare)			
Armor Type	Leather Gloves, Knuckles		
Defense	30 (+7,8)	Attack Damage	9-15 (+7,8)
Durability	50/50	Weight	5
Usage Restriction	Cat Knight only, at least level 60		
A defensive weapon that has been passed down for generations among the Meow, new abilities have surfaced after receiving the blessing of the Meow temple. Now, the Cat Paws will display their true abilities, as befitting of a Truthseeker's equipment. As the wearer becomes stronger, the Cat Paws will also become stronger.			
Options: Attack speed increased by 15%. Agility increased by 20. Critical hit rate increased by 15%.			
Special option: Defense and damage will increase by x0.1 of the wearer's level.			

'A growth item!'

The fundamental stats hadn't changed. But the important part was the special option attached at the end!

They had changed to a growth item with added defense and damage according to his level. Therefore, when he reached level 100, the damage and defense would also rise by 10. In the game world where one is constantly out of breath to find a better item every time they leveled up, a growth item was a tremendous treasure.

With its stats raised, the Cat Paws' defense was on par with the Black Bear Mouse Leather Armor, and the damage wasn't too far behind Lancel's Sword, either. He could only be more surprised the more he looked at them.

He hadn't been able to acquire a decent item for himself because he'd been concentrating on the event quest for a while. But once things started working out, he had been effortlessly striking it lucky. The quest was resolved successively and items were randomly pouring in.

'So that's how it is, the purpose of the Envoy of the Merpeople quest was this!'

When Ark was given a quest that told him to return to a low level area despite having returned from clearing the White Whale's labyrinth, which could normally only be done at a considerable level, he had thought it a little strange. But now he knew the reason.

The profession exclusive item that is given to those who clear a profession quest—Envoy of the Merpeople was a scenario quest to give him that reward.

"This is a true armament of the Meow. How is it? Do you like it?"

"Yes, thank you. It really makes me think I did well to become a Truthseeker."

"That must be so, indeed. Uhuhuhu. Of course you should like it. Because a Truthseeker is honorable. Anyway, I'm happy because you're satisfied with it. Now, shall we finish this? Having come to me as the envoy of the Merpeople, you listened to my request, and I gave you a just reward. Since we both got what we wanted, now we have a justification. I, Hassan, the Elder of the Meow, will formally accept the apology of the Merpeople. The Meow scattered all over the world will think of the Merpeople as comrades from today onwards."

Th-th-thump, the quest information window opened.

The quest 'Envoy of the Merpeople' has been completed.
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You, who sought the Meow as the envoy of the Mermaid Queen, convinced Elder Hassan and achieved the objective. Now the two races have promised to forget the grudge of the past and be concordant. As the witness of this promise, you have become the first Human to receive respect from both races.
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Reward: Item upgrade, EXP +500, Fame +35.

Even with the completion of the quest, his experience didn't go up by much. But he was more than satisfied with the upgrade of the Cat Paws alone.

"Now, we've finished our business here. Shall we go rescue the village called Lancel?"

"Wait a minute. There's something I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Actually, I found a legacy of Hero Maban when I went to the Underwater City."

"A legacy of Hero Maban?"

"Yes, this is it."

When he took out the Star Fragment and showed it, Hassan made a surprised expression. "This is definitely one of the Three Marvels that disappeared along with Hero Maban."

"As an honorable Truthseeker, I wish to find all of Hero Maban's legacies."

"Indeed. After all, it's said that Hero Maban first started with the work of finding the Three Marvels. He didn't need the help of the Three Marvels after realizing his true strength later, but the Three Marvels were certainly the origin of Hero Maban's power. If you're a Truthseeker, of course you'd want to gather the Three Marvels."

"Do you happen to know where the other Three Marvels are?"

This was Ark's second objective. The Three Marvels were absolutely necessary for him to grow as a Dark Walker. As such, it meant that finding the Three Marvels was his main goal in the game, for the moment. But the clues were currently too insufficient. Therefore, he had thought that the Elder of the Meow, who had served Hero Maban, would have a clue.

"I said this earlier, the Three Marvels disappeared with Hero Maban. I only know about the origin of the Three Marvels. I don't know if it'll be a clue or not. If even that is fine, it's not hard to tell you."

"Yes, even a small clue is fine."

"Hm... it's a bit of a long story, but... I'll put it simply. First, you have to know the Three Marvels didn't originally belong to Hero Maban. They were ancient legacies of the three races that represented the Beasts. Around the time when the Dark Age was starting, Hero Maban went searching for them, asking to borrow their power, and he received the Three Marvels at the cost of undergoing their trials. And it's said that Hero Maban, who later achieved complete power, returned the Three Marvels to their original owners."

"He returned them all?"

"That's right, it's actually ridiculous that Adelaine stole the Star Fragment. The Merpeople who inhabit the ocean serve the stars. The Star Fragment was probably a treasure of the Merpeople from the very beginning. Hero Maban likely intended to return it to the Merpeople sometime as well."

"Where are the other two races that gave Hero Maban their treasures?"

"I don't know that." Hassan scratched his head. "Humans lump us all into the Beast category, but in truth, the Beasts hardly interact with each other. Moreover, we were locked up for a long time, so there's nothing more to say. I heard Hero Maban also went looking for countless Beast races in the past and spent a long time before he found the Three Marvels."

"Then have you heard of the Underground World?"

"The Underground World?"

"The Mermaid Queen said that one of the Three Marvels might be in the Underground World."

"To be sure, she might know the whereabouts of the Three Marvels, since she receives information from all sea creatures. But the Underground World... I remember hearing a snatch about it somewhere."

With his arms folded, Hassan fell into thought for a while.

"Yes, that's right. There were a few times when we traded with the Beast race of the Underground World when I was young. Among the Beast races, they're the only ones who have good craftsmanship. Well, we always traded through a deputy so I've never seen them myself, but... there was always the same shape carved into the goods that they made. That's right. It was probably this shape."

Hassan drew a picture that was like three triangles overlapping.

"Though I don't think it'll be much help..."

"That's not so, thank you."

The only information he'd gleaned was a simple figure, but Ark wasn't disappointed. For now, he'd gotten a clue. It was a big advancement compared to when he didn't know what he had to look for. What was left to do now was to thoroughly go through New World, as he had been doing until now. As he gathered information and completed quests, he would definitely be able to find a connected clue.

He sometimes forgot, but this was a game. It was a world made for the players.

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For the time being, Ark returned to Jackson Castle. When he entered the Magic Institute's tower, a Magician NPC approached him.

"What service do you desire?"

"I've come to apply for letter movement."

"What is your name?"

"It is Ark."

"Ah, Ark-nim! I've been waiting for you."

"Huh?"

"Wait a sec. Here it is. This is a letter was entrusted to me from a person who utilized letter movement here a few days ago. Looks like the sender is Shambala-nim."

'Shambala!'

Ark quickly took the letter and read it.

FROM Shambala
I'm leaving first because of an urgent quest.
Fighting with you was fun in its own way. But if possible, I want to try a proper test of our skills with you. Ah, I'm not saying we should be enemies, 'cause I don't want to get mess with a dude like you as an enemy. If you think the same way, then come to the arena in Selebrid, the capital of the Schudenberg Kingdom, later on. 'Cause

I'm planning on being there for a while starting from next week.

PS: I'm taking the Mermaid Scale.

'So Shambala thought of the same thing as I did.' A smile spread on Ark's lips.

As he looked at Shambala's fighting skills, he'd thought of really wanting to test their skills. It was made so that no matter the martial art, anyone who had learned a certain level of hand-to-hand combat would harbor a competitive spirit, regardless of whether or not the opponent was friend or foe. In addition, this was a virtual reality game. They could fight with not just martial arts, but with the special skills they had learned while playing the game. They would be able to feel a completely different pleasure that was impossible in an ordinary match.

'An arena, I'm getting curious about it...'

Ark remembered the arena advertisement flyer that had been pasted on the village message board. The arena was a place where player vs monster, player vs NPC, and player vs player hand-to-hand matches unfolded. There, it wasn't just that you weren't penalized even if you died, but you could also be rewarded Gold, a rare item, or a title depending on your points. Several kinds of match events were also prepared, so there was no guarantee a high leveled player would definitely win. The kinds of skills you had learned and how you used them were more important than level.

'He said in a month, right? Okay. I've got plenty of time, so I'll raise my skills a ton until then.'

Actually, Ark had determined Shambala was at a level higher in martial arts skill. But this was the virtual reality game world; martial arts skill wasn't everything. He still had a grace period of a month, so it shouldn't be impossible to catch up to Shambala.

Alan was an enemy to Ark, but Shambala was a rival who meant well. While he was having such thoughts, the Magician spoke.

"There's normally no incident of holding onto a stranger's letter. However, I specially received it because the receiver was you, a famous personage in Jackson. When you give and send letters next time, please utilize the Transfer Mailbox."

"The Transfer Mailbox?"

"You don't know of it? It is a service operated by the Magic Institute. If you're interested, please read this. It hasn't been long since we started the service, so we are

giving a special 20% discount during our event period. If you register now, we will also discount the usage fee you'd have to pay next month."

Speaking like a cellphone sales representative, the Magician pointed to a pamphlet pasted on the wall.

#### Transfer Mailbox

Have you been worrying because there is no way to contact a faraway friend? Worry no longer, for there is the Transfer Mailbox, developed by the Magic Institute at the end of long research!

The Transfer Mailbox will allow you to contact your friends spread all over the continent at any time.

An initial registration on a Transfer Mailbox costs only 50 Gold. The usage fee is 5 Gold a month (Usage Restriction: At least level 50)

How to send a letter using the Magic Institute's transfer magic: If the player writes a letter and puts it in a mailbox prepared all over the continent, it will immediately be transferred to the Magic Institute. The transferred letter can be found at the Magic Institute in your area of choice at any time. If you pay an additional fee, you can even send an item. However, usage is only possible if you have a Transfer Mailbox. If the receiver doesn't have a Transfer Mailbox, of course they cannot send a reply.

'Ehh, so there was a function like this.'

Ordinary mail could only be sent to a village designated by a player. In other words, if the receiver left for another region, then they wouldn't be able to receive the letter. In addition, unless you asked someone, there was no way to send an item to a faraway person. But there had been a method like this... Ark still didn't know even a tenth of the vast New World.

However, there weren't really any players Ark currently knew besides Shambala. Calling JusticeMan and Roco by phone was much faster and more convenient than a letter. He had no reason to fork over 50 Gold and a monthly usage fee of 5 Gold.

"No thanks."

At Ark's reply, the Magician nodded with a sullen face. "Understood. Then I will impart the letter movement. If you enter the magic circle on the top floor and use the Letter Movement Orb, you will immediately move to the Giran Magic Institute. It is still a technique in the testing stage, so the situation won't be that comfortable. Please prepare yourself firmly before departure."

Ark went up the stairs and stood on the magic circle. He pulled out the Letter Movement Orb and gazed at Snake for a moment. Having been resummoned after 24 hours, Snake looked even more haggard.

“Just hold on a little, Snake. I’ll definitely be able to find information that will help you when we return to Giran. There are many Merchants, and there are high ranking Magicians in the Magic Institute, too. No matter what, I’ll help you complete metamorphosis successfully.”

Hiss, hiss...

Stroking Snake’s head as he spoke, Snake nodded weakly. When Ark raised the Letter Movement Orb to his forehead, the scenery of Giran popped up in his mind like a panorama.

His body instantly turned into particles of light which were then strewn asunder. Then, sucked into the uppermost floor through a narrow glass pipe, Ark was flung out towards Giran from the transmitting tower.

He was pressed forward at a tremendous, dizzying speed.

TO BE CONTINUED...